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To ra do ra

STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA ART YASU

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VOLUME 4

story **Yuyuko Takemiya**

illustrations **Yasu**



~Clear weather on an August day~



7:00 AM

The Takasu
House

"What is it? Ugh, you reek of alcohol!"

"Wah...hiccup...waaah!"

I got out of bed because Yasuko made a racket when she got home and fell down at the front door. It's summer vacation, but I'm still up pretty early. For the time being, I'll get Yasuko to her bedroom. I don't really have anything else to do, so I guess I could make the miso soup stock.

I'll take my time making breakfast. Since I'm up early anyway, I can even clean the AC filter. After that, I can really clean the bathtub drain, wash the windows, do the laundry, scour the stove with baking soda, and wipe down the tatami.

"Ryuu-chan...waaater...waaater...waaaah!"

Yeah, yeah, water, right. Is barley tea okay?



10:00 AM

The Student
Council Room

"Huh, the president isn't here yet. Good morning, student council members!"

"Ugh, Kitamura-senpai, you smell sweaty!"

What smell? What are you talking about?

This invigorating sweat, sacred to a high school baseball player, came from appearing at club activities without fail as the head of the team. It's from completing the required training program and jogging on top of that. It's surely a badge of fitness. This healthy, pure sweat pouring from my body is my pride and—

"Ugh! What's with you? You look like you're melting!"

Good morning, president. I will shower at once.



12:30 PM

A Family
Restaurant

"Excuse me, can I order?"

"Yes, right away!"

Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, here they come,
here they come, here they cooome!
Today the curtain has risen on the
lunchtime from hell! All hands prepare
for orders from every direction! You smell
of tobacco, I will prepare a seat for
you in the smoking section right away!
Oh, it's that guy! Getting in position to
monitor the lunchtime soda machine for
cheapskate drink stealers! Hamburger
plates get hot, so be very careful! Please
understand that we must decline split
checks! I'm incredibly sorry, but that item
is from the grand menu and at this time—

"Hey, we haven't gotten our food yet!"

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!



"Whaaat, you're not thin at all! I'm concerned about the fat you've got right there!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Shut. Up. You. Stupid. Brat!

You've got some nerve criticizing the flawless, beautiful, cute, perfect body of Ami-chan-sama, you lowly gym trainer! Huh?! Huh?!

You should prostrate yourself and worship my gorgeous body. Your tears should flow. Your heart should stop at how awe-inspiring it is! Now grovel and beg forgiveness, you bottom feeder!

"But having a figure like that is pretty great."

What, you think so? Oh you, that's not true — ♡

3:00 PM

A Certain
Model's Gym



"That was a lovely ceremony, wasn't it?! Let's grab a bite to eat after this."

"Sooorry, my husband is waiting!"

Right. That's right, isn't it?

Sorry, I can't read the atmosphere because I'm single, and there's no one waiting for me at home. Guess I'm eating dinner alone at a family restaurant again tonight. Well, I'll relax and buy a magazine so I don't notice the stares. Even though it's a family restaurant, they've made it so you can order a glass of wine, which isn't bad, I guess. Ahh, I hope my students don't see me...

"But hey, Yuri, you're doing great as a teacher. I'm so jealous of your single life!"

Are you serious? Want to trade lives? Do you really? Want to give it a shot?

7:00 PM

A Road Near a
Wedding Hall



10:00 PM

Once Again at the
Takasu House

“Hey. Taiga, hey! Don’t
fall asleep!”

“...”

Today’s breakfast was a
hearty miso soup and dried
horse mackerel. For lunch today,
I went with Ryuuji and Ya-chan to
Pseudobucks and got the toast lunch
set. Today’s dinner was beef stir-fried
in oyster sauce. I’m so full... I’m so
full... “Hey! If you’re going to sleep,
go home! Jeez, you’ve even got such
a peaceful expression... hwaah...

“You’re so noisy... I can’t sleep like
thi...” *SNORE*

THE SUMMER VACATION TRIP
TO THE VILLA STARTS ON
THE NEXT PAGE!



TORADORA! Vol. 4

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Toradora!

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ToC

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Chapter 1

Not cute.

Not tough or brimming with savagery or intelligence, either.

Pitiful faced. Miserable and shabby and disgraceful, more than anything.

Ryuuji was just a dog.

By the time he realized it, he was alone. Just walking left him out of breath, and he was helplessly lonely. He was so helplessly lonely that all he could do was prostrate himself.

He bowed to *her* and begged. "Please, somehow, please be with me," he begged. "I can't live all by myself, please marry me."

"I suppose," she said and put her heel on his dog head. She let out a long sigh through her nose. Her lips contorted, and her eyes filled with a complex mix of contempt and pity. "If you're desperate enough to say that, I suppose I'd be willing."

And so, she and the dog were married.

Their new home was the Takasu house. What had happened to it? With some remodeling, the second story rental had become a doghouse complete with a triangular roof.

"Ryuu-chan, look, look, see how many babies there are. This one's white, and this one's speckled, and this one's brown. See, a whole bunch of puppies were born. Taiga-chan gave birth to so many. I'm a grandmother to puppies now!"

"..."

Takasu Ryuuji's eyes popped open.

His heart felt like it was connected to a defibrillator.

The sleep paralysis finally released him. It was the first time he'd experienced it, and now he couldn't even wipe the sweat that drenched his

forehead. He gasped several times and finally rolled out of his bed to escape. He got on all fours like a dog on the worn but clean floor. Then he squeezed all the carbon dioxide from his lungs while putting his forehead to the ground, prostrating himself.

“It was a dreeeeeeeeam...”

He couldn't even wail. As if in rigor mortis, he couldn't move. Sweat drenched his shirt, and every muscle in his body shook from the vestiges of the nightmare. He combed his stiff fingers through his hair, which was dripping with sweat as though he had taken a shower. He pulled at it, mussing it up.

What a dream. What kind of nightmare was that?

He, a dog, had failed at life and bowed to Taiga so they could be together, and she had given birth to dog children for him. Was any future more pitiful than that? If there was, he wanted to know. He wanted someone to tell him about it. He wanted to water down the shock of that dream, even if only slightly. He had had a glimpse of a shockingly bleak future. He was a dog bowing before Taiga. There had been a doghouse, and a dirt-poor doghouse at that, he thought. Granny Yasuko and Taiga, who were holding the dog children, were wearing simple, primitive animal skins. Taiga had been wearing a tiger hide.

It was too much to take in at four o'clock in the morning. It was mid-summer at dawn. Outside the window, the world was already growing light. He could hear cicadas crying even this early in the day.

He took a breath and felt his strength leave him. Something came to mind.

After dinner the night before, it was so hot and everything on TV was so boring, and on top of having nothing to do, the AC was barely working. They felt like watching a scary movie, so he and Taiga rented a DVD.

A True Story: In the Islands of Japan was the title of the one they'd chosen, for some reason. It was so crudely made that it transcended being a cheap film and entered the territory of farce. Aside from the obvious CGI, they could clearly see the rope pulling along the mannequin that was supposed to be a corpse. They could even see the guy, who seemed to be part of the crew, pulling it. Incidentally, that man was also an actor in the

next story and was chased around by a female stalker with long, evenly trimmed hair. She was wearing a trench coat. The whole thing stank of a rip-off.

Though they made fun of the terrible, three-part mini-drama, they still watched to the end out of sheer boredom.

The third story was *that*. “Terror Island: Kansai Region Compilation: I Gave Birth to Dog Children!” The terrible appearance and screaming of the low-budget, unknown actress was a little scary.

“Noooo, the children are getting spots all over ’em!” She carried a Dalmatian puppy, enthusiastically playing her part with an obviously fake Kansai dialect.

They burst into laughter together and said it was a waste of time and money. Then finally, Taiga went home to her condo next door because she was tired.

Ryuuji knew he was pitiful for letting such a terrible drama give him nightmares. If he’d known things would go this far, he would have wanted his money back. If he’d known he would be subjected to this much terror, he would have even paid money to avoid it.

“That really was...the worst...”

The individual elements of the dream weren’t so bad—rather, it was awful in its entirety. He released several sighs and rubbed at the nape of his chilly neck, damp from cold sweat.

In order to at least breathe in the refreshing, early morning air and try to do something about the horrible feeling, Ryuuji opened the window beside his bed with a clatter. However, the air was muggier than he anticipated. He stuck out his tongue and gagged.

Then he froze.

“Uh!”

A reality even more frightening than his dream had developed outside his window.

It was on the second floor of the high-class, neighboring condo that was separated by a divider. The person wearing a disheveled camisole and

glaring at him from the open window of Aisaka Taiga's bedroom was none other than Taiga herself.

He didn't know what had happened, but she stood there with wrinkles crossing her forehead like lightning bolts. Her upper lip twitched, and she sneered with overflowing disgust. He didn't know if she had done it to herself, but her hair was a mess, as if she'd just finished enacting a skit about explosions. She stared at him with the brimming madness of a tiger who had tried to eat a viper and gotten the snake stuck in its throat. Ryuuji didn't know how long she had been staring at him and the window of the Takasu's house.

He couldn't possibly say something like "good morning" to her. He could almost feel dreadful fireworks sparking off of her like antagonistic, poisonous radio waves.

"Ryuuji..." she said.

He felt a shudder of cold blood rising from the bottom of his stomach.

"I had a horrible dream. It was an extremely, extremely...hateful dream. You were a dog, the dog was my husband, the children were dogs, and I was wearing a tiger hide. It was the worst..."

Gulp. He swallowed, unable to respond.

No way.

Could they really have had the same nightmare on the same night at the same time while next door to each other? Their sync levels were practically maxed out—if they kept this up, would the rental and high-class condo meld into one?

Please make this a dream, too. Ryuuji slowly closed the window and pretended he hadn't seen or heard anything. He burrowed back into his bed again.

I don't want to think about anything else.

“It’s an oomen,” Aisaka Taiga mumbled.

“*Oh men?* What kind of dating app is that...ah!”

“No, you idiot. A prophetic dream.”

This girl threw shredded green onion at a person’s eyes if they simply misheard her.

“I’m talking about that outrageous nightmare from this morning,” she continued. “I think something like that is called a prophetic dream. We’re going on that trip tomorrow, so our subconscious showed us that dream.”

“What?” Ryuuji asked as he wiped at the soup broth hitting his face. As Taiga slurped her noodles, she glanced at him, watching his mouth as he nibbled on his spiced myoga ginger. His eyes glinted like a Japanese sword that had absorbed too much blood, but he wasn’t chewing on illegal contraband and having rainbow-colored dreams—he was just affected by how terrible his nightmare had been.

The sun blazed outside the window, the rays hitting the muggy two-bedroom apartment mercilessly at eleven in the morning.

Though it was summer vacation, the Takasu household was having morning breakfast unreasonably late.

Taiga, who was across the table and facing him, muttered, “You don’t know anything,” haughtily and swept away all of her coveted somen noodles.

“Agh!”

She dropped the noodles from her chopsticks. Silently, Ryuuji lifted exactly the right amount of noodles with his own chopsticks and put them into Taiga’s broth. Of course, she didn’t thank him. *Slurp*. In a moment, the white noodles disappeared into her teeny, rosy mouth.

“Basically, that dream was an omen,” she said after slurping the noodles. “It’s saying that if we don’t take countermeasures, we’ll end up like that.”

“I see... which means we shouldn’t watch weird DVDs before bed. So, what does that have to do with the trip to Kawashima’s place?”

“Haaaah,” Taiga sighed dramatically and put down her chopsticks as if she was fed up. She raised her chin and looked down on Ryuuji as she arrogantly rested her head in her hand. “Your horrible guesses are especially irritating today. I’ve lost my appetite. You can take this away now.”

“You ate two people’s worth of food. At least clean up after yourself.”

“I’m so full I can’t move.”

“You’ll turn into a cow.”

“I’d still be more useful than an incompetent dog.”

Withdrawing was faster than arguing; it was also less exhausting. *Go ahead and turn into a cow, then. I’ll milk you.* Ryuuji gave her the evil eye as he piled up the empty dishes. A future as a lifelong dog-slave wasn’t as heartening as being a dairy farmer with a cow in tiger’s clothing.

“So, to continue,” Taiga said. “That dream was our sad future if you aren’t able to confess to Minorin and I can’t get together with Kitamura-kun. You don’t want that to happen, right? It’s terrifying, right? Then you have to do *better*, right?! That’s what it means. You don’t want that, do you?”

“Well... of course I don’t want to end up like that,” Ryuuji muttered unpleasantly as he gritted his teeth. With bitter, glinting eyes, he looked at Taiga, who wasn’t helping to clean up.

“You’re the one who bowed down to beg me, you cheeky... whatever. Basically, that was an omen, and if we don’t take advantage of our big chance on this trip, that’s our future. That’s how I see it.” Taiga took the floor cushion from under her butt, folded it in half, and lay down, using the cushion as a pillow. Sprawled out like a synchronized swimmer, she stuck her white legs in the air and the soles of her feet against the wall.

She’s got such bad manners. Even as Ryuuji frowned, he didn’t refute her. *Well, I guess if you leave out that shady part about the dream being an omen and stuff...*

The big chance was the upcoming trip, of course. A three-day, two-night stay at Kawashima Ami’s villa that they would go on the next day.

At the end of the semester, they had a pool showdown involving the whole class to decide whether they would go on the trip or not. In the end, they settled on Kitamura, Minori, and Ami going along with Ryuuji and Taiga, too. When all was said and done, it was the one and only event of this plain and incredibly boring summer break that Taiga and Ryuuji were having because, for various reasons, family trips were irrelevant to them. Even though they didn't say it out loud, they were excitedly counting down the days on their fingers. They planned to go shopping at the station for the trip that day.

Of course, the biggest reason for their excitement was that the atmosphere might be just right. They were staying overnight on a trip with each of their love interests. For Ryuuji, of course, that was Kushieda Minori.

Continuing to clean up, Ryuuji's face softened until he was beaming.

"You don't have to call it a prophetic dream or anything ridiculous like that," he said. "We never get a chance like this. I can't really talk to her at school, so I think this time, if I can, I want to try to get a little bit closer to Kushieda."

"There it is. That's it." As she remained on the ground, Taiga's dangerous, glittering eyes rested on Ryuuji.

"Wh-what?"

"This is why you get terrible prophetic dreams. Because you're like that."

She pulled up her long hair, which had been softly flowing over the tatami mat. Taiga lifted her face and propped her chin in her hands on the sitting cushion. From between the gaps in her long bangs, her round forehead was dripping sweat, and her nose formed a delicate line. Her small lips were like a rosebud. She looked up at Ryuuji with eyes like sleepy, malevolent jewels. Her long eyelashes fluttered. Her eyes shone bright.

"You're a stupid dog, right down to the marrow in your bones. Your base is a dull soup, only good for people who are soup fanatics."

If it wasn't for her personality, the girl in front of him would have been a magnificent beauty.

“What are you ogling at? I’ll lay you out.”

“...”

In her case, she wasn’t just saying that—she could actually do it.

Aisaka Taiga, as her name suggested, was as brazen and violent as a tiger. People called her the “Palmtop Tiger”—she was tiny for a second-year high school student, at one-hundred-forty-centimeters tall. Because of her power, her bad temper, and her ferocity, people feared her and stayed at a distance.

Be that as it may, based only on appearance, Ryuuji, sitting next to her with his legs folded under himself, looked like an appropriate accomplice to the Palmtop Tiger. His piercing sanpaku eyes looked ferocious and sinister enough to kill five run-of-the-mill delinquents with nothing more than a glance. But those were just genetics. He just had that kind of a face.

He was methodical and awkward, an unassuming person, and performed household chores as naturally as breathing. Takasu Ryuuji was just that kind of boy. Ryuuji thought again about how astounding it was that he had come this far living with a girl like that.

But, of course, he couldn’t share such a delicate emotion with Taiga.

“You got it? I’ll explain it again from the beginning for someone as dull as you, so listen up.”

“Ugh.”

She thrust up a thin finger in a controlling manner below Ryuuji’s chin. Tyrannical contempt flickered in her eyes. “You said, ‘if I can,’ and ‘even a little bit,’ and ‘try doing better,’ and stuff like that, right?”

“I-I did! What about it? Don’t poke my chin!”

“You’re always like that. ‘If I can do it.’ ‘If it works.’ ‘It’d be nice if I said something good.’ You can’t just giggle and go yakety-yakking like that. Up until now, the whole time you’ve... no, we’ve gotten comfortable, waiting for luck to come to us. Then we make mistakes. It’s a pattern. If we keep this going, before we realize it, you’ll be a dog and I’ll be a bride, and Minorin and Kitamura will probably have a banquet in our doghouse and

give a moving speech about how they were always rooting for us to be together.”

“No...way...that wouldn’t...”

He didn’t remember giggling and yakety-yakking, but the theory that they were caught in a rut was spot on. They might have been. He couldn’t deny it.

At Ryuuji’s expression, Taiga gave him a deep nod. “Right? That’s precisely why it was a prophetic dream. We have one shot now to decide this once and for all. If we don’t break out of this horrible, terrible pattern we’re always falling into, your future as a dog actually awaits. If we let this one-in-a-million chance that fell into our laps get away, there might not be another one.”

“Which means, we need to work together during the trip to make sure something good happens...”

“See, you’re doing it again! That’s the losing pattern. So, I thought, instead of that, this time around we’ll seriously fight it. I don’t ever, ever want that nightmare to become reality. So I think one of us should back up the other, and we can go at it at full power. It’s better than going down together.”

“Right...” He couldn’t nod with her finger still thrust against his chin, but she was right—maybe. Sometimes even Taiga said smart—

“So you can forget about yourself and focus on working for me and Kitamura-kun, and do your best because we’re leaving our fate up to you.”

“Huh?”

She spoke outrageously quickly, like the contract of a corrupt financier trying to hide the fine print on the other side of the paper. Leaving Ryuuji in the dust, Taiga once again lay down on her cushion.

“Ahh, I’m thirsty,” she said. “Hey, you, get me barley tea. Water it down, too.”

Wait a second. Ryuuji sat down with his legs folded under himself. He looked intently at Taiga’s face as she lay down. Of course, he couldn’t not follow up on the incredibly important decision she’d just made.

“Don’t joke,” he said. “I heard you loud and clear. Why would the conversation automatically steer in that direction? Based on what you just said, it could also be flipped around. *You* could back *me* up.”

“...”

“Don’t ignore me!”

“Shut up... ow!”

He pulled the cushion out from under Taiga’s head. “This isn’t a joke! You talked your way around all that stuff and, in the end, you just wanted to say that?! Just how far are you going to twist this around?!”

“What do you think you’re doing, *baldo*?!”

“I’m not balding!”

“I’ve got my own interests at heart! What’s wrong with that?!”

“Wh-what’s with going on the offensive...”

“Give me back my pillow.”

“This is *my* floor cushion!”

“It’s *my* pillow!”

“It’s a floor cushion!”

For a short while, they had a futile tug of war with the floor cushion. Still sitting, they pulled on it as though the one who stole it would win.

“Ngh...”

“Ugh...”

SHRRK! The cloth tore, and Ryuuji instinctively let go. (King Solomon should have overseen this case.)

Taiga tumbled straight back. “Ow!” She hit her head heavily on the table. **BAM.** The incredibly loud sound lingered as she curled up, hugged her spoils, and held her head, falling silent.

“H-Hey...are you okay?” Ryuuji asked.

That sound wasn’t a joking matter. If she got any stupider, it’d be a problem. Ryuuji thought of approaching her from the back and seeing if she was okay.

“Ow!”

“Whoa?!”

Still silent, Taiga’s beautiful face contorted from pain and loathing into a man-eating demon. She started beating Ryuuji with the floor cushion. Ryuuji ran away, disgracefully dodging the cushion as it careened towards him. *Bop, bop.*

“Stop it! Don’t be violent! You’re raising up dust!”

“Shuddup!”

As he avoided the Palmtop Tiger’s full-out, floor cushion attack, the sliding door behind Ryuuji clattered opened. Taiga didn’t stop.

His ugly pet parakeet Inko-chan’s ugliness increased three-fold as she suddenly cried, “Haaaagah!”

But the unyielding cushion attack didn’t stop.

“Guh! Wah...wah, wah, wah...”

BOP! It hit her perfectly.

The cushion hit Yasuko-chan, Ryuuji’s thirty-something-year-old Lolita mother, who had just opened the sliding door, right in the face. The breadwinner of the family, she had come home at eight in the morning and had just gotten to sleep after working a hard day.

“S-s-s-s-sorry...”

Even Taiga tossed aside the floor cushion and jumped at Yasuko, who was holding her face and seemed about to cry. Apparently unable to take on the force of that impact, she collapsed onto the floor in her ridiculous getup of Ryuuji’s junior high shorts and her own zebra-striped camisole.

Ryuuji was at a loss for words. Taiga, who also noticed something was off, jumped away. Now he understood. Inko-chan’s earlier “Haaaagah!” was an attempt to say “Hag!”

Yasuko had aged suddenly. It might have been the heat or lack of sleep or that she hadn’t fully taken off her makeup when she’d fallen into a drunken slumber, but her usual jiggly, estrogen-filled skin was now wrinkly and had aged horribly.

“Wh-what’s wrong? Why did you age...? What in the world happened?! Hurry and drink a supplement or something! Put something on your face!”

“W-waaaaah... it’s because you’re so noisy that I can’t sleep...! If I don’t sleep, I age...”

He didn’t have any words for his mother as tears ran down her face.

The son and the freeloader continued to apologize earnestly. To let her get a good night’s rest, they quickly left the house.

“This is all set. Are you done?!”

“Ready when you are!”

Across the street from Taiga’s condo was a park.

A green road of Zelkova trees surrounded it with a spacious open area at its center. People walking with their dogs chatted occasionally, and a group of children from the nearby kindergarten sat under the trees complaining, “It’s hot.” “It’s muggy.” A cacophony of cicadas filled the air and, though there was a breeze, it wasn’t much different from the heat blasting from a dryer.

It was midsummer, midday, and even their eyes seemed to burn. Ryuuji and Taiga stood across from each other. They had drawn a line between them with the tips of their feet. They held badminton rackets they had borrowed from the landlord. Sweat ran down their foreheads, and their cheeks were flushed with excitement.

Both were incredibly determined. Taiga had even gone back to her condo to change from her fluttery dress into a shirt and shorts. Her long hair was tightly tied up, and her glowering eyes burned.

“It’s a three-point match. That’s it—whether you’re crying or smiling at the end. The one who loses... well, you know about that part, right?”

“Fine by me.”

This wasn't just badminton. They were betting on their futures with this game. The loser of the match would have to back the winner on the trip.

As Ryuuji lightly played with the shuttlecock in the grassy smelling air, he snickered to himself. Though he was against Taiga, who had the reflexes of a wild animal, (except when it came to swimming) he had this game in the bag. The truth was that Ryuuji, despite appearances, had been in badminton club in junior high.

There was no net in the center of the rectangle acting as their impromptu court. The game would be harsh. Rulings would be made with that line, period. They would play roshambo for the serving rights and quickly finish the game before they got heatstroke.

If that nightmare was an omen, he didn't want to end up like that. Honestly, he didn't think Taiga's support would help much but having to back Taiga would be a serious burden. At the very least, he didn't want her getting in his way. He was doing this for the sake of the trip he had been looking forward to—for the sake of a bright future with Minori.

“Let's do it!”

Ryuuji floated the shuttle up into the blue sky and swung the racket with all his strength. *Schwip!* With a comforting sound, the shuttle flew diagonally, straight toward the ground.

Or so he thought.

“There!” Taiga dashed like a beast, carving through the grass and dirt with her racket, just barely hitting the shuttle so it flew back up. To think she would have made it! Now Ryuuji was flustered. He followed after the shuttle barely floating above the centerline and dove for it.

He managed to just barely bop the shuttle so it arched. Taiga laughed, “Ha!” and caught the slowly falling shuttle perfectly in the center of her racket as she swung.



“Ugh!”

“Got it!”

She pumped her fist. Ryuuji, on the other hand, was speechless. What had just flown past him? A rocket?

“Come on, what are you standing around for? I got a point!” Taiga laughed and swung her racket around. The shuttle had fallen behind Ryuuji, hitting the soft ground.

“Y-you... you’ve played this before?!” Ryuuji didn’t think she had but asked anyway.

Taiga nonchalantly said, “Hmmm? When I was at private girls’ school for elementary and junior high, I was in the tennis club aaaall nine years. That might have something to do with it.”

Fwish!

Her high-speed swing was eye-opening. It was so powerful that, had it not been a racket but a cleaver in her hand, she would have made a herd of stampeding buffalo part.

Taiga calmly fanned herself and said, “It’s hot, let’s hurry up and finish this.”

Wait a second, Ryuuji thought. He couldn’t let his gaze timidly drift away as he picked up the shuttle. What was this? He didn’t have the advantage at all. This was supposed to be a match he couldn’t lose.

“Okay, this time I get to serve,” she said.

“R-right.” Though it was early, he was sweating. He wiped his forehead as he handed the shuttle to Taiga with the best poker face he could muster.

Taiga tossed it up lightly in her hand several times. “Here I go!”

She threw the shuttle high into the pure, blue, midsummer heavens. She extended her thin arm to its fullest extent and sprang with her whole body to swing the racket up.

Ryuuji held his breath as he stayed in the center where he could respond whether it went to the right or left.

“Huh?!”

Taiga swung the racket as hard as she could and hit empty air with a swish. The shuttle pathetically plopped at her feet.

“Right, one point, one point, right! It’s a draw, we’re at a draw!”
Ryuuji had abandoned all pretense of maturity.

“Nuh-uh! That doesn’t count! It doesn’t count!”

“You can’t do that. Of course it counts, you klutz!”

With a desperate look on his face, he ran to where Taiga was positioned and tried to take back the shuttle by skillfully popping it up with the edge of his racket, but she grabbed him by his collar.

“Wait a second!” she said. “You’re going to do that?! That’s cheating! You’re cheating! *Cheating!*”

“What?! You dropped it, didn’t you?! You can’t do that, so it’s my turn to serve!”

Their ugly, heated argument spread across the grass. They pushed each other with their rackets. Taiga hit Ryuuji’s fist with her own to get the shuttle back. Ryuuji used their height difference to his advantage and stood on tiptoe with his hand raised in defense. Using his butt sumo skills, he began wriggling away from Taiga.

The bored troop of wives walking their dogs laughed at them from afar.

“I can’t believe they’re doing that when it’s so hot.”

“That boy looks like a delinquent at first glance.”

“But they’re so lively.”

“Won’t they collapse from heatstroke?”

Even their dogs had their mouths open and were panting as though they were somehow laughing. But Ryuuji and Taiga didn’t have time to pay attention to that.

“Just give it to me! I’m going to do it over!”

Taiga, worked up, had thrown her racket to the side and was cracking her knuckles. She took a step toward Ryuuji as though to attack him.

“Gyaaaan!”

The racket she'd thrown went farther than anticipated and hit the head of one of the dogs. *Wham!* It was a clean hit.

Oh no. Ryuuji and Taiga turned as the owner raised her voice.

"Oh dear, oh no. Are you okay, Chiiko-chan?!"

"Wooh wooh..."

Chiiko-chan, who did not look okay, raised her face to glare at Taiga. She was a muscular, ferocious-looking, double-coated, unfamiliar and gigantic husky that was bound to be hot in the midsummer.

The dog stared at Taiga, her expression like an ogress mask. Chiiko's nose wrinkled as she stepped forward. *It was you?* those eyes asked. *If you apologize, I'll forgive you.*

Taiga glanced at Chiiko's face and immediately looked away. Then Taiga lowered her head in obedient apology that showed her regret *only* to the owner standing behind the dog.

She raised one eyebrow as she looked one more time at Chiiko, huffed a breath, and haughtily raised her chin. Though she didn't say so out loud, her attitude indicated that she would apologize to the owner but would not bow to a *dog*.

Then it happened.

"No, no, it's fine," the owner said. "Chiiko has a cute face, but she's actually super healthy despite her looks, and she's proud of her strength. My friends call her grand sumo champion Chiiko...ah!"

Shaking off her leash, Chiiko made a mad dash toward Taiga. *Kyaa!* The troop of owners shrieked, and Ryuuji automatically backpedaled at Chiiko's ogres expression.

But Taiga remained facing forward.

"You wanna go?!"

"ARF!"

BAAAAAAM! She stopped Chiiko's attack.

In the grassy expanse of midsummer, a high school girl and a husky who were the same height grappled with each other. They were evenly

matched, their power balanced. Chiiko's back legs shook, and Taiga's sneakers slipped little by little.

Just when Ryuuji thought they were about to start a daylong battle, the human and animal separated and quickly put distance between themselves.

"Ah!"

"Woof!"

Urgh. Chiiko growled in a low voice. She raised her curled tail high, lowered her neck, and stared up at Taiga with her light blue eyes.

What? Taiga also growled and fought back. Her bright feline eyes turned to slits, and her arms hung loose and ready.

There was no rationality in their eyes; it was a fight between a pair of brutes.

The two beasts circled, still keeping distance between them. The first one to move was Chiiko, standing on her hind legs, her giant front legs furnished with claws.

Wham! She pushed Taiga in the stomach.

"Ugh." Taiga stumbled and glared at Chiiko. "Now you've done it!"

"Woof!"

She slapped at Chiiko's long snout.

"How could you do that to an animal?! I-I'm so sorry!" Ryuuji couldn't help but worry. What was Taiga doing to someone else's pet? He bowed his head incoherently to the owner but didn't have enough courage to get in between the two.

"N-no, no...I'm the one who should be apologizing," the dog's owner said. "I wonder if that small girl will be all right." The middle-aged woman took a glance at Ryuuji's face and turned red, "Oh, what a handsome young man."

The other owners surrounded them and whispered to each other.

"His eyes have definitely got something wrong with them."

"She's into that stuff."

Please leave me alone, Ryuuji thought. I know Chiiko and I are in the same category when it comes to our faces.

The peanut gallery swallowed their breaths and watched. Taiga and Chiiko continued with their evenly matched fight. They exchanged slaps several times, glared at each other, and assessed their opponent.

“There!”

“Wuff!”

Once again Chiiko went on all fours.

Taiga was so caught up in her fight with the dog and its ragged breath that she’d completely forgotten about Ryuuji.

Ryuuji thought for a bit. “Hey, Taiga. We’ll let go of that last point, so I’ll serve,” he mumbled.

Taiga raised her face in surprise. “Huh?! *Huh?! What did you just say?! I can’t hear you over this stupid dog’s breathing!*”

You don’t have to hear anything.

He took the shuttle and racket in hand and made an impromptu return to the court by himself. *Plop*. Ryuuji hit the shuttle gently. It fell into Taiga’s ground. He walked over, picked it up, and hit it again. It fell into Taiga’s ground. He walked over, picked it up, and hit it again.

“There, it’s done,” he said. “First to score three points. I’m the winner. You make sure to back me up during the trip.”

“H-huh?! Hey, you can’t decide that all by yourself! This isn’t a joke! Move aside, I don’t have time to play with you anymore!”

Taiga returned to her senses and tried to shove Chiiko away, but Chiiko was still grappling with her, ogress mask in place, and wouldn’t move. It was as though Chiiko thought her pride as a sumo champion would crumble if she lost this contest of strength.

“I said we’re done! Argh, okay, fine, I got it, I give, I give! I was wrong! I’ll apologize! I’m sorry! Okay, now move! Go home!” Taiga tried to pull away, but it didn’t get through to Chiiko. Her face had turned bright red and she was dripping sweat. “Come to think of it... oh, it’s hot... it’s hot! Your fur is hot! Your fur is *super hot!* I’m gonna die!”

Grappling with Chiiko was probably exactly like wearing a fur coat under the blazing sun.

Fruitlessly trying to peel Chiiko off, Taiga tried to wrench herself away. Chiiko just adjusted and took a step closer with her back leg. Taiga took another step back and to the side. Chiiko also took another grand step.

Though he felt bad for Taiga's (and Chiiko's) desperate expressions, as a spectator, it looked to Ryuuji like they were salsa dancing.

"What's she doing...? They're facing off."

It might have also pulled on the heartstrings of the owner. She slowly took out her cellphone and, naturally, started taking a video, memorializing her pet and the local high school girl's strange dance.

"Get away! I said get off! Ahh, your breath is hot, too!"

It was the height of summer. The merciless sun beat down, heating Chiiko's fur and Taiga, who was firmly grappling with her. The frequency of their steps increased, their passionate rhythm a notch more danceable. Taiga was nearly in tears. Sweat poured from her, and she started to shake. Chiiko started stealing the lead.

"Agh, I got it! I got it, okay! Fine, you guys won! Ryuuji, aren't you a dog? Come and take it off of me! Tell it to stop!" Taiga pulled her face back and turned, pleading with Ryuuji.

"Are you sure you're fine with me winning?" he asked.

There was a second of speechless hesitation and then another, until finally, she breathed roughly into the silence. "I-It's fine!"

Ryuuji and the owner desperately persuaded Chiiko to let go of Taiga, who had thrown in the towel.

And, like that, Ryuuji was triumphant.

Frankly, although Ryuuji had won, he didn't really expect Taiga to help. The klutz god had showered her entire body with blessings, after all. He didn't even expect her to try.

But, Taiga said, "I have an idea for a really good approach."

In Pseudobucks, where they'd gone to cool off in the air conditioning, Taiga raised her face from her iced milk tea. Her T-shirt was covered in dog prints. Her whisper trickled faintly out into the café. The voice of the part-time female college student rang out, "Welcome to Sudoh bucks..." This was the Sudoh coffee stand and bar. There was no "bucks" in the actual name.

Taiga whispered.

His mouth still filled with iced coffee, Ryuuji's sanpaku eyes went wide. "Are you serious? I see, well... talking about it is one thing, but how are we actually going to do it?"

"We'll do it together." Taiga pointed at herself and then Ryuuji in turn with her thin fingertip. Then she said, "You cheated in the match, and I don't want to work hard for you either, and I don't think you're good for Minorin, but that nightmare was unbearable, so I'll actually help you this time. Well, it's better to hurry up and be rejected rather than having unfulfilled dreams, right? If you're rejected, you can grow as a person, and that dream future probably won't happen, right?"

"Do I really have to be rejected first?"

"Don't be stubborn. With the way you are right now, when your proposal bombs, you'll probably throw yourself on a grenade, hurt your back, and have to be hospitalized. You'd only be able to look at the ceiling and sigh."

The large feline eyes that looked across at Ryuuji quivered with contempt stronger than the midsummer sun.

It was six in the morning on the day following the midafternoon badminton match.

"Okay!"

In the dark kitchen, Ryuuji checked the freezer and nodded once as though in confirmation.

He looked at the spare rice he had made. There were a good five portions. He had finished separating them into individual bowls and wrapping them. Unfortunately, he could only get a variety of frozen side dishes.

“I have something I want to tell you before I go on the trip and leave you behind,” he said. “It might be annoying, but listen to me carefully. Right, I’ve prepared everything, so you can make it all in the microwave. Be careful not to use the stove.”

“...Drr...”

“You can eat the Caspian Sea yogurt I’ve made. I want to keep the one in the small bin from being completely sterilized so I have it for the next batch, so don’t touch it. Make sure not to forget to mix the pickling rice bran every day. You can put a plastic bag on your hand when you do it, but when you do, whisper, ‘Thank you for everything,’ in your heart and cherish it. Also, you can eat the cucumbers today and the eggplants sometime tomorrow.”

“...oo...”

“Even if Inko-chan’s water isn’t out, change it twice at least, once in the morning and once in the evening. Even if it looks like she still has food, it’s the same, twice a day at minimum. Change the newspaper at the bottom of the cage every day. Talk to her every once in a while and put the cloth on her before you go to work. If that’s all you can do, that’ll be fine.”

“...ool...”

“I’ve paid the bills, so no one should come by. I think they shouldn’t come. ...They probably won’t come. Well, just have something prepared if they do.”

His mother was speechless. She tilted forward, backward, left, and right as her son repeated his precautions.

“Hey, are you really listening?” he asked. “Do you understand? Try repeating it back.”

“...Drool...”

They were in the gloomy two-bedroom apartment where, as always, the morning sun didn’t penetrate. Yasuko’s breath still completely reeked of

alcohol. And of course that would be the case—he had forced her up just an hour after she came home and was ready to sleep and then pulled her into the kitchen.

Yasuko, who kept wobbling around, opened her eyes two millimeters. But, well, there were things in the world you could learn while sleeping. When he asked her to repeat the words back to him, her reply was “drool.” She was at least listening to him, so it might be fine.



Two years earlier, in junior high, he had left home for four days and three nights on a school trip. The laundry became a mountain, the takeout containers in the sink stank, and the raw garbage that hadn't been taken out was rotten and fermented, but Yasuko and Inko had survived.

"Well then, I'm going."

"...Have a nice time... huh?"

It seemed that she might have finally noticed his T-shirt and shorts, as well as the bag her son had in hand.

Yasuko furrowed her brow. Puzzled, she tilted her head.

"Ryuu-tan...where're yoo goin...?"

"On a trip. I told you about it didn't I? I told you earlier?"

"A tri...? Tri..."

He didn't know whether she had completely understood or not, but Yasuko nodded several times. "Uh huh. Trip," she muttered and plip-popped in her bare feet back to her futon.

Well, guess it's fine. Ryuuji turned.

"Inko-chan...I'm off." He walked towards the birdcage next to the window and gently lifted the cloth that covered it.

"Oh..."

Inko-chan's face flashed as she was sleeping. She was at max output the morning they parted. He still didn't have an answer for why her beak wouldn't completely close or why froth dripped from it, or why she squinted with the whites of her eyes showing, or why her body continuously convulsed.

Even so, no matter how gross she was, she was definitely still his beloved pet. He lovingly put out new water and food for her.

"Well then... guess I'll head out!" Ryuuji stood, lifting his methodically packed bag onto his back.

When he opened the creaking front door, breeze left over from the summer morning cooled his eyelids. You wouldn't know from being in the house, but the weather outside was fair. Fluffy clouds bubbled in the distant sky, predicting the day's heat.

By the time it got hot, they would probably be at the villa—no matter what was said and done, it was enough to soften his face with excitement.

Well, this is a two-night, three-day trip. What sort of fun things will be waiting for us? What'll I talk about with Minori, and how close will we get? Meeting up with Kitamura for the first time in a while will also be nice. Thinking about the battle that would start between Ami and Taiga already tired him out, but it was still summer vacation. They would be going on a short trip without any parents, and there would probably be a lot more fun things than not. *Definitely.*

He softened his steps for the landlady as he went down the iron stairs. Under the early morning sky, he made the ten-second walk to the condo next door.

This was Taiga, so she might not have been ready to go yet, and because of that, he had left home early.

“Oh.”

Taiga, who was on the stairs of the marble entryway, lifted her face when she saw Ryuuji. She raised her right hand and gave him a morning greeting.

“Whoa. Well, that’s unusual, you’re early,” he said.

“I am occasionally.”

In another rare occurrence that morning, Taiga was wearing a new mint-green dress. Her hair was prettily put together and braided only on the side. Her lips were even made up a light color. She was like a pure rose blooming in the summer morning. Ryuuji averted his eyes as though something were shining into them, raised his left hand and returned the greeting.

Taiga had said she would devote herself to backing him while going on a trip with the boy she liked. In the end, Taiga must have been excited like him and woken up early. Ryuuji felt like laughing a bit, and in order to keep her none the wiser, walked ahead of her.

They were meeting in fifteen minutes. They would make it even if they walked slowly, but he was restless and felt like hurrying.

One of their friends had showed up early to the meeting spot at the terminal station ticket gate.

“Hm?”

“That’s...Minorin? Isn’t it?”

Even though there were only a few tourists, salarymen who seemed to be on trips, and others accompanying their families in the station, people still milled about. One person, however, was standing in a spot by themselves.

“Good morning!”

Ryuuji and Taiga could only see the girl with the supple body and smile. It looked like Kushieda Minori. When Minori noticed them, she abruptly but slowly widened her stance and bent her knees. Then she hinged forward and slowly circled her head. When she did that, a bespectacled face appeared behind her, imitating her movements with slightly different timing.

“Yo! Right on the dot, how great of you two.”

The two of them stood directly in line with each other as they continued to revolve. Ryuuji and Taiga, unsure how to respond, stood stock-still. The surrounding passersby stared at the mysterious young ones. *That’s the zoo, that’s the move from the zoo*, a pair of thirty-year-old businessmen in suits were probably thinking as they squinted in nostalgia.

Minori and Kitamura, the softball club manager combo, turned their faces like a propeller.

“Ha ha ha, they’re pulling back, they’re pulling away! They’re retreating, Kitamura-kun!”

“And even though we practiced.”

Smiling, they broke apart to the right and left, patted each other on the back, and praised each other.

“Nice dance!”

“Nice zoo!”

It seemed it wasn’t only Ryuuji and Taiga who were in high spirits and excited for the trip.

“You guys are really lively first thing in the morning,” Ryuuji said. “What’s the ‘zoo’?”

“Don’t worry about it, don’t worry,” Minori replied. “I was excited, and when I came early, Kitamura-kun was here, too.”

“And there was a full-length mirror right there, so we started practicing to greet you like this,” Kitamura said.

“You’re really stupid.” Ryuuji jabbed Kitamura in the side. “Like actually. Yo, glasses, long time no see.”

“Yo, yo, sanpaku!”

Ryuuji smiled with his entire face, but his eyes were fixed on Kushieda Minori.

Once she’d stopped her odd dance, Minori looked like a radiant child sent from the sun. As she toyed with Taiga’s hair and Taiga sniffed her, she shone blindingly bright like no one else.

Though she wore simple knee-length shorts and a short-sleeved parka, she was incredibly, unimaginably cute. She might have been more sunburned since he had last seen her. Like a kid, just her cheeks and the tip of her nose were red. Minori’s eyes narrowed when she smiled. The way she looked was really unbelievable to Ryuuji. The way her bag sagged from one shoulder was adorable, and her thin ankles above her sneakered feet were adorable, and that smiling face, in such a good mood, was so brilliant he couldn’t look straight at it.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Takasu-kun? We’re finally going on the trip! Say something!”

“R-right.”

Bop. Minori hit his shoulder and his dumbfounded stupor metamorphosed into quivering nervousness. Seeing her again after such a long time, his anxiety was even stronger.

And Taiga, who was at his side, was no better.

“Oh, but Aisaka, it’s been a long time,” Kitamura said. “We haven’t seen each other since closing ceremonies, right?”

“Ah, uh, oh...”

Kitamura grinned, and Taiga stood straight as a rod. Ryuuji didn't know if she was trying to appeal to Kitamura with her outfit or just being shy, but she played with her braided hair with her fingertips and seemed unable to reply. She looked around dubiously, seeming suspicious as her mouth opened and closed. She silently mouthed something but seemed at a loss for words.

"So, is Kawashima not here yet?" Though he had no intention of being her lifeboat, Ryuuji asked Kitamura to break the silence.

"Not yet. She hasn't messaged me, and it's still a little before the meetup time."

"Right. Hm, in that case...come over here!"

Minori beckoned Taiga, Ryuuji, and Kitamura in front of the mirror. *Huh?! No way!* But Minori pulled them in, squashing Ryuuji and Taiga's protests with a, "Well, well, well, well, well."

Kawashima Ami arrived at the ticket gate several minutes late.

"Huh, I wonder where everyone...hm? Hmm?!" She slightly tipped the sunglasses that hid half her pointed face. Her lips, which were like rose petals, half-opened in a cute way, as if she was speechless.

"Yo, Kawashima."

"You're two minutes late, Ami."

"Good morning, Ahmin!"

"It's not like I'm doing this because I want to. Minorin just told me to do it."

Ryuuji, Kitamura, Minori, and Taiga stood lined up one behind the other, from tallest to shortest. They moved their arms, at different heights, around. From Ami's point of view, it probably looked as though Ryuuji had eight arms.

"I wonder where they are?" Ami asked. "Where is everyone...?"

"Hey, Kawashima!"

"Ami, we're over here!"

“Ahmin, where are you going?!”

“Don’t you dare run, you dumb Chihuahua!”

“I wonder where they are? Where *are they*...?”

Ami pretended not to know them as she dashed away. The four of them chased her, waving their arms grandly as they scampered after her.

“It was a great Asura imitation for just five minutes of practice,”
Minori reminisced afterward.

Chapter 2

It took an hour and a half to get to Ami's villa by limited express train.

It might have been because the summer break didn't quite align with the Obon holidays, but only half of the unreserved seating was full. The five of them secured three-seater seats beside each other and moved them to face each other.

Ami carelessly threw her expensive, brand-name Boston bag into the luggage rack first.

"No way~! It's been so long since I've seen everyone! How have you all been? Ahhh, Minori-chan, I so wanted to see you~!"

She might have done it just for the summer vacation, but her flowing hair was slightly dyed and looked prettier than usual. She pushed her hair back, as though nostalgia had brought her to the brink of tears, and turned her angelic smile to Minori.

"You ran away from us," Kitamura quipped but was completely ignored.

"Yuusaku, really. You're always like that~! Right, your glasses! Aha ha~!" Ami's sweet words were completely hollow. She threw a smile at her childhood friend Kitamura.

"And you, Takasu-kun~!"

She turned right around and practically threw herself against Ryuuji's chest, grinning. Her face became round and innocent as a baby's. Ryuuji took a step back instinctively. Still smiling, Ami took a step forward to corner him.

"Nooooo waaaay~! Hey, hey, what were you doing during summer break? You didn't call me or message me at all~! That wasn't any fun for me~!"

"...You never gave me your phone number or your email address..."

“Huh, I haven’t? Ha ha! More importantly, this trip is exciting, right? You’re excited about it, right?”

As she turned a deaf ear to him, she lowered her voice. A wicked flame burned in her eyes. For a sneaky moment, her cold fingers crept onto Ryuuji’s wrist.

Her figure was perfect in her simple tank top and jeans. Her incredibly long limbs were drawing stares, too.

“I kind of feel like I’ve seen that girl before.”

“Isn’t she a model?”

Two college-age girls whispered to each other.

When Ami noticed, she smiled in satisfaction and nodded.

“Oh, oh no! After I washed my face today, I only put on sunscreen! I don’t even have makeup on! No way, my skin isn’t even that nice...oh no...”

She put her silky smooth, milky face between her hands and frowned as though troubled.

Her bare face is that beautiful with no makeup, Ryuuji thought. Her whole body was thoroughly showered by envious stares from those surrounding her.

“But it’s a trip, right? I don’t need makeup or anything~! I’ll. Go. As. My. Plain. Self!”

Kya ha! That was the finishing blow. She had lopped off the heads of the women in the train car who had committed the sin of putting on a thick layer of foundation. Ami’s beautiful features grew even more radiant, like a certain countess who drank sacrificial blood. Her small, bare face was as charming as an angel’s, the color of milk and rose with large glittering eyes like a Chihuahua.

The aura she broadcasted seemed to be yelling at full strength. *I! Am! A! Beauty! You homely girls should think yourselves fortunate just to be able to breathe the same air as this chosen Ami-sama! Mwa ha ha! You may bow your heads to me!* She seemed in top form even on that day.

Then she added a finishing touch.

“Oh, right, right, Takasu-kuuun, it looks like Aisaka-san still hasn’t come, so maybe you should call her~? I don’t mind at all if she just doesn’t come though.”

She completely ignored Taiga, who was in front of her, and turned a troubled look up at Ryuuji while snuggling up beside him. At that point, the train moved with a jolt.

“Hey, sit down, you lecher.” Taiga poked Ami in the eyes.

“Ah!” Ami fell hard, butt-first into the window seat. Taiga had dug in all the way up to her first finger joint.

“Th-that hurt...!”

“I thought I’d poke out those eyes for you, since they’re so useless. I’m right here.”

“Oh-ohh...you’re so tiny, I didn’t see you...”

“See, they don’t work.” *Shall we do it again? This time I’ll get my finger all the way in.*

Minori stopped Taiga, who had her small hand up in an ominous V sign.

“Now, now! Please dismiss my eyes from that and stop right there for today!”

Minori, who had come between them, pushed in her cute, double-lidded eyelids with her nails. She seemed to purposefully be making distinct double-lids like a foreigner’s.

Uhh. Ryuuji was taken aback by this weirdness, but Taiga didn’t waver.

“Minori, don’t make weird faces. Sit down. You’ll fall over.”

Taiga made Minori sit next to Ami. After them, Taiga casually grabbed Ryuuji’s hand as he was still standing in the passageway and practically threw him so he was sitting next to Minori. Taiga herself was facing Ami. It seemed this was the beginning of Taiga backing him, which touched his heart. Out of necessity, Kitamura sat facing Minori. In other words, Kitamura was sitting next to Taiga, but Taiga did her best to get as

close to the window as possible. As though to pretend he didn't exist, she was firmly facing only Ami.

"I feel an oppressive force... like a really low but thick wall or something..." Ami turned her face away in disgust.

"I'm so small, I couldn't possibly be smothering you."

Bam. Taiga stomped her foot and continued to stare into Ami's face. "Oh. Dimhuahua."

Dim Chihuahua. It was Taiga's new shortened nickname for Ami.

"Are you talking to *me*?!"

"You have bags under your eyes."

"Uhh..."

Prod. Taiga pointed at Ami's eyes to indicate the defect.

Even Minori was staring intently at Ami's face. "Huh, even Ahmin has shadows on her beautiful skin. Oh dear..."

My condolences. For some reason, Kitamura was politely lowering his head.

Now that they had mentioned it, Ryuuji saw shadows under Ami's eyes. Her perfect, rosy skin hadn't changed, though, and she was still more than beautiful enough compared to normal people.

"What happened to you...?" Ryuuji asked. "You've got a few wrinkles. Did you not get sleep?"

"W-wait, even *you*, Takasu-kun? How could you look at someone's face and say they have bags or wrinkles?! It's not like *my* skin would have something like...naugh!" Ami pulled out a hand mirror with a Chanel symbol on it and looked at herself. She shrieked boisterously, dropping the mirror. *Clack.*

Fingers shaking, her voice quivered dramatically. "Ahh, what's happened? I can't believe it. I really have been busy lately, like really...ahh, I don't like this. What am I going to do...? Maybe I should die..." Clutching her forehead, she closed her eyes. She really did seem shocked.

Minori held Ami's shoulders and swung her around in an attempt to lift her spirits. "Ahmin, keep it together! What happened?"

“I’ve been home the entire summer at my parent’s house and focusing on work there. Then I finally got time off and I meant to take the last train yesterday to come back, but there was a small delay. The train left me behind and, in the end, I got on the first train for this morning. I’ve only slept three hours...haah...”

Oh dear. Minori and Kitamura’s eyes oozed sympathy. Ryuuji also thought, *oh dear*, but the only things his eyes oozed were murder and madness. On top of that, Taiga was reaching her hand out to touch the aforementioned dark shadows.

“Right, it must have been so hard for you, Ahmin,” Minori said. “So that means your short summer vacation is finally starting today?”

Ami said, “That’s right.”

“Hmm...in that case, since we’re finally on this trip, we need to make sure you have lots of fun, Ahmin. A batter can’t just hit whenever they want. They need to fit into the batting order. So the boys have to come up with topics of conversation to fix Ahmin’s exhaustion. Aim for a home run! Batter up!”

Regardless of what Minori said, her boy team only had two people on it.

Across from Minori, Kitamura said, “The lineup, huh? Then, let’s have a debate about something we have in common. All right, Ami, what topic do you want to discuss? Do you want to talk about where this year’s pennant race is going to be? Or where the high school baseball tournament is going to be? Or do you want to debate the merits of the college entrance exams we’ll be taking next year?”

He swung big and missed.

Next, it was Ryuuji’s turn.

“Don’t ask about that,” he said. “Anyway let’s eat breakfast for now. I brought onigiri.”

“No way, seriously?! Yay, I’m so happy!” Minori jumped up and applauded.

Next to her, Ami, who was battling with Taiga, said, “Onigiri?! No way, I’m so psyched! I haven’t had anything to eat or drink since this

morning!” Her eyes shone.

Kitamura also looked boisterously happy and pushed his glasses up.

Ryuuji had made a base hit. He promptly opened the cloth-wrapped package in his luggage and served two onigiri per person. Taiga tried to keep away from Kitamura as much as she could, and Ami said, “Hey!”

Minori was practically folded over with her belly on her knees as she reached toward Ryuuji to get them. “Wow, they feel like boobs,” she said. Holding one in each hand, she returned to her seat, seeming satisfied, and took a bite with great delight. “Whoa, it’s so good! Takasu-kun, you made these?! These onigiri are super, super delicious! Come to think of it, they even have ume in them! It’s ume-azing! You hit a home run right from the start, didn’t you?!”

She flailed her legs and hit Kitamura across from her.

“Yeah, this is great.” Kitamura seemed to be in a good mood, even though he’d been kicked.

“Eating simple onigiri on a train is great, right~?! Couldn’t expect less from Takasu-kun! Would you be my bride?” Ami’s large eyes glimmered, her words seeming to invoke his earlier nightmare.

“No.”

His answer was quick. He wasn’t tempted by a Chihuahua with seaweed stuck to her lips.

While Ami clucked at him with cold eyes, Ryuuji turned indifferently away.

“Anyway, what did you do during summer vacation?” He was aiming for another home run subject...or rather, he was doing what he and Taiga had agreed on earlier.

“I really only got to work the whole time,” said Ami as she continued to chew. *Ah, I’m so, so tired.* “Club, work, club, club, work, work, work, club, club, club, work,” said Minori, the workaholic.

Kitamura nodded. “I was also mostly at both softball club and the student council. Last year, my great-grandfather passed away, so I went to the country for his memorial service.”

Then it was Taiga's turn. *Go ahead.* Ryuuji motioned at her with his eyes, and Taiga nodded slightly to indicate she understood.

"I compiled CDs with spirit voices on them into an MP3. Here, Minorin, listen." Taiga suddenly pulled white earphones from her bag, which she had ready to go, and put them into Minori's ears.

An infamous reproduction of the mysterious "♪...Senpai... ♪" voice leaked out of them at a high volume. *Buh!* At that moment, something shot out of Minori's mouth. It went straight across just like a bullet and hit Kitamura's forehead with a *splat!* Kitamura held his forehead as he groaned and put his face in his hands. The thing that fell into his lap was a seed. Minori had spat out the ume seed.

"S-sorry Kitamura-kun! Actually, wait...Taiga?!" Minori apologized to Kitamura, pulled out the earphones, and scolded Taiga, her voice cracking.

"Sorry!" Taiga said and shrugged her shoulders.

"What do you mean *sorry*?! What was that?! That was that thing, right?! That thing where the underclassman calls out from the land of the dead? N-n-n-n-n-no! What am I going to do? They called me! I'm going to be dragged down into the land of the dead, too! Come to think of it, that underclassman bears a deep grudge!"

"Kushieda, calm down. First of all, please do something with this seed."

"Oh my, the Kushieda seed destiny."

Kitamura handed the ume seed that had fallen into his lap back to Minori and turned a sincere smile towards Taiga.

"Aisaka, do you like scary stuff like that?" he asked.

"Huh! Uh...I don't know...if I like...it...maybe...I do...?"

"Oh, that's surprising."

Unexpectedly faced with Kitamura's incandescent smile up close, Taiga was a wreck as she uneasily picked grains of rice off her fingertips.

Minori got out of her seat and sat down on top of Ami's knees, reaching forward to grab Taiga's shoulders and shake her back and forth.

“Why?! Why is that the first I’ve heard of this?! You weren’t interested in that before, were you?!” Even though they were in public, she raised her voice, red-faced as she flailed in a desperate attempt to get Taiga to deny it.

Ami seemed to be in pain under her. “You’re heavy...” she groaned, but Minori didn’t seem to mind.

Taiga and Ryuuji exchanged glances and faintly nodded at each other. It seemed that Minori really couldn’t handle horror.

Yes—this was the big maneuver Taiga had cooked up for this trip. Its title was, “Scare Minorin and Have the Knight Appear Plan.”

“So Minorin really can’t handle horror, spirits, or anything relating to the occult,” Taiga had told Ryuuji at Pseudobucks. “She mentioned it in her introduction on the first day of school. And when she just saw a sign for a horror movie in the street, she had goosebumps all over, so I think it’s probably really true.”

So, Ryuuji and Taiga were going to cooperate and use phantom warfare to scare Minori on this trip,. Then, at the final moment, when she was in the very depths of terror, Ryuuji would appear. “*It’s okay, because no matter what happens, I’ll protect you!*” The supernatural phenomena would stop, and Minori would be enthralled.

“*Takasu-kun, you really did protect me...Takasu-kun, you’re my very own Daimajin demon...*” she would say. Reluctant as they were to do it, something that drastic would probably bring Minori and Ryuuji closer.

Minori, who had no clue what was going to happen, said, “I’m confiscating that,” and tucked Taiga’s iPod into her pocket. “Seriously, Taiga, no more scary stuff! You can’t listen to weird things like that! Let’s get pumped and get rid of Ahmin’s exhaustion with a wonderful and academic topic! Like, we can talk about what kind of rice balls we like or about kids or about ramen or exercise!”

“Ohh, right, right, so a scary story I have from last week...” Ami said, clutching Minori, who had climbed onto her knees like a child.

Minori quickly shook her head. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! That’s enough! Ahmin, you don’t have to talk about that!”

“Hmm, it’s not that scary. It’s a funny story. It’s *funny*.” Ami grinned and spoke sweetly into Minori’s ear.

“...So it’s about when I went to the studio for a magazine shoot last week.

“I went into an empty room to fix my makeup. The makeup rooms in that studio are super small and there are sinks in them, but they look sooo old. The water pipes are all exposed, and the lighting is dark, and the mirrors are a little cracked, and I don’t really like them. But then, it’s not like I can choose the studio.

“They said the makeup artist was already taking off makeup, so I had to go in a room by myself and...it was spattered with blood. The sink, the mirror, the floor. It was everywhere. It was *covered* in blood. It was red and totally smelled like blood. It was definitely...blood. It was someone’s *blood*.”

“That *is* scary...” Minori covered her face with her hands, and her body went limp. Ryuuji couldn’t tell if she was pretending or serious, but her eyes rolled back, showing the whites, and she started slipping out of Ami’s lap.

Ami firmly grasped Minori and pulled her up, smiling brightly and rocking Minori as though pacifying a baby, “No way, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! No, no, it’s a joke! Aha ha! The blood was because one of the staff had a bloody nose! The cameraman at the time was a super difficult person and when he didn’t get his way, he threw around film box. And there was a staff member who got that in the face~! Their nose bent like ninety degrees~! It’s so stupid, right~?!”

Aha ha ha ha. Ami laughed lightly by herself as the limited express train rocked and clunked. Ryuuji silently decided that he didn’t really like that joke.

“I-Is that so...? Right, that’s a relief...” Minori raised her face and huffed, Ami still holding her. She wiped the excited sweat from her brow. “I was certain there was a bizarre murderer upstairs disposing of severed remains in the sink. Then it clogged, and the drain pipes burst, and flesh and

blood were bubbling up from the sink drain. The hair would be all tangled up like, this and there would be flesh like roast pork, and a big molar would plunk out and... waah, it's scary."

Immediately, Minori was once again pouring sweat.

This time, Ami said nothing as she casually shifted Minori back into the seat next to her.

A delicate silence fell over the group.

Maybe it was Ryuuji's imagination, but that image was even grosser than Ami's joke story.

Minori didn't stop. She twisted her arms around absently. "But, but, you know, the eyeball would just pop right out. What would you do if there was an eye? And Taiga, what if that mess was me? What would you do? Hey, Ahmin, what would you do?! No, that would just end with me washed down the drain! I don't want to die like thaaaaat!" Minori roared, flexing her arms between her thighs.

Eyes on Minori, Ryuuji's gaze glinted like a too-sharp knife. He wasn't plotting how to dispose of a corpse—he was simply thinking. What would he call this type of person? An explosive self-scarer? Minori would take something frightening and spook herself further by making it scarier and scarier. Anyway, the plan to scare Minori was already going better than he thought it would because of the unexpected assist from Ami.

At that point, Kitamura raised his voice unexpectedly, "Whoa."

The glare outside grew. Ami, who was on the window side, and Taiga and Ryuuji, and finally, Minori raised their faces.

Then, all at once, the color in Minori's face returned and her eyes shone like usual. "Wh-whoa! We're here, we're here! It's beautiful!"

Outside the limited express train, the horizon glittered, the Pacific Ocean an increasingly more radiant blue and gold in a shower of midsummer sun. Under the shining blue sky, the August scenery dazzled as far as the eye could see.

“It’s aaaaamaaaaaazinnnnnnnnng!!”

Amazing-mazing-ing... Minori’s voice seemed to echo across the sky.

They disembarked at the station for the villa and went down a road that detoured through the mountain for about twenty minutes. When they left the forest path scattered with volcanic ash, their field of view brightened. And then, it appeared.

Ami turned around. “Sorry for making you all walk.”

“It’s real,” Taiga grimaced.

After Minori, Kitamura, and Ryuuji exclaimed to their hearts’ content, the three of them didn’t have anything more to say. Their eyes opened wide, and like a herd of small, frightened animals, they naturally froze as they looked at the scene below them.

They had heard the villa was near the ocean, but they hadn’t expected it to be like this.

“Y-you really are rich. This might be rude, but it’s only now sinking in... Ami’s house is about three times as big as mine.” Kitamura finally squeezed out words, shaking his head in surprise.

“Really, seriously, Yuusaku, what are you saying? This is normal. Nor-mal.”

Then, are we less than normal? Ryuuji thought, but this wasn’t the time to sulk.

From the forest, the road abruptly continued down stone steps, which led to the ocean. There lay the glaring white sand and the deep blue waters. Intense light from the midsummer sky pierced the spray from the crashing waves, which glittered and radiated like stars. That scene that continued to the Pacific Ocean’s edge was exactly like a painting. The wet breeze on their skin along with the salty smell and the quietly beating waves was almost surreal.

The beach was completely devoid of people as they continued up to the inlet where the waves rippled and broke against the rocks. The beach itself was probably also owned by the Kawashimas.

It was like paradise. There was the sound of the continuous waves, the sound of the wind, the summer smell, the light of the sun, and then...the opulent house.

A deck made of stacked logs opened onto the beach. Beyond that was an elegant, white-stone entrance like a small European hotel. Ryuuji couldn't see how large it was because the entirety of the marvelous building was hidden behind the branches of trees planted to prevent erosion. Even so, it was terrific, and something you didn't see often in Japan. Along the beach, the spider lilies covered the bottom of the residence with green and dark pink flower blooms. The double windows were twice as high as a normal house.

"I-I-Is..." Minori took a step forward. "Is this where we're going to stay?!"



Minori flipped around, jumped and latched onto Ami, her backpack grazing Ryuuji and Kitamura's noses. The two boys leaned back desperately to escape the danger.

"No really, Minori-chan, of course! Of course it is!"

"Ngyah! Uwah, uwah, it's super pretty, it's way too pretty! I'm so emotional! Staying in a place like this is like a dream! Ahh, let's hurry up and go, Ahmin, Taiga! The boys, too!"

"Aha ha, you're making too big of a deal out of it." Ami didn't seem altogether unhappy about Minori's intense excitement.

Minori was practically tumbling as she ran down the steps. Ami used her long legs, jumping down easily and chasing after her, skipping a step at a time.

"Oh, hey, hey! That's dangerous, girls! Don't trip!" Kitamura went after them.

Taiga began to run after them, but Ryuuji grabbed the back of her collar. "Don't be impatient. You'll fall."

"Huh? When have I tripped?"

Taiga wasn't just a klutz—lately, she also seemed to be suffering from amnesia.

"Go down slowly," he said. "The sand will be slippery, so watch your feet." He grabbed the disagreeable Taiga's elbow and tried to gingerly step forward with her.

"Take it easy, you sex offender!"

"S-se...?!"

"You thug! What are you imagining, *Eros*?!"

Taiga took advantage of his shock and roughly yanked back her arm. Then, without any warning, she hit Ryuuji's back. *BAM!* She sent him flying.

"Whoa!"

He missed two steps, his foot stopping him just in time. Taiga stood behind him imposingly. Her piercing, glittering eyes brutally narrowed as she looked down at Ryuuji.

“Go ahead of me. Then, in the one-in-a-million chance I trip, you can cushion my fall. Only then will I give you permission to touch this body.”

Her pride comes before a fall. Ryuuji dripped with cold sweat. All he could do was stand stock-still in surprise. “I... I don’t even have words for how ridiculous you are... I just shuddered from the bottom of my heart...”

“Look who’s here. It’s that chit-chatty chatterbox. Zip it!”

“Huh?”

“Shut it! Zip your yap!”

He was at the mercy of her torrent of tormenting words. She said anything she pleased.

Minori, noticing the two’s heated state, turned around. “Ahh, Taiga and Takasu-kun are hot, hot, hot...ahhh!” As she pointed her finger teasingly at them, she tripped spectacularly on the very last step. *SHRAAAA!* She dove face-first into the sand, landing spread-eagled on the toasty beach.

“HOOOoooot!”

“M-Minori-chan, are you okay?!” Flustered, Ami ran over to her.

“I’m fiiiine! My face just got burned a little from the friction and hot sand!” Minori grinned and made a peace sign as she somersaulted forward and stood. She kicked defiantly at the human shaped imprint she’d made in the sand and shouted “Railroad!” before making a mad dash toward the villa’s wood deck.

As for Taiga...

“Ugh...sand got into my sandals...” She had finally descended the stone steps. Ryuuji didn’t know where her earlier intensity had gone, but, every time her sandal sank into the sand, she fearfully stopped, shook it restlessly, and hopped on one foot.

“If stuff like that gets to you, you won’t be able to walk on the beach,” Ryuuji said, walking ahead of her.

Taiga furrowed her brow and just snarled about the sand being hot or something. She couldn’t seem to take another next step. *You’re so stubborn, I don’t care.* Ryuuji turned around out of exasperation when it happened.

Kitamura appeared. “What’s wrong, Aisaka? Are you okay? I can hold your luggage for you.”

“Uh...”

Kitamura didn’t hesitate as he slipped the large boxy bag from Taiga’s hand. The well-toned muscles of his arms showed as he easily lifted the two bags.

“Do your feet hurt?” he asked. “We did walk quite a bit... sorry for not noticing.” His beautiful, concerned, double-lidded eyes were overflowing with unending affection as he looked at Taiga.

“Y-yeah! I’m fine!”

“You are? Then let’s go.” He stood ahead of Taiga, who shook her head from side to side. Kitamura slowly moderated his pace as he started walking, but he didn’t leave her behind, and kept checking on her.

Of course, Taiga’s face was bright red, and she trembled so hard she was practically vibrating, but her expression was neither quite happy nor sad. She gritted her back teeth until her cheeks hollowed. Her back was straight as a board. Her right arm and right leg jutted out at the same time as she followed him, but she was at least walking.

Ryuuji thought deeply about his own lack of popularity. He couldn’t be kind to a girl as spontaneously like that and he didn’t have a great body. If only he were the type of guy who could do the same thing for Minori right then and there. If only he could have spontaneously taken Minori’s luggage and said, “Did you burn your face? Sorry I couldn’t help you when you fell.” All he did was watch her as she tripped, laughed, got up, and started running.

This was why he was no good, why he couldn’t make progress. It was depressing.

“No one’s been here this year, so everyone will need to clean first. The dust might be terrible,” Ami said.

“Whaat?!” Ryuuji suddenly raised his head as Ami put her luggage down on the wood deck and turned. “We’re...*c-cleaning?!’*”

Desire burned in his dangerous sanpuku eyes, glinting until they seemed to boil over. He wasn’t thinking, *Cleaning’s lame, let’s light it on*

fire and burn everything, let it all burn. He loved cleaning. Ryuuji really, really loved cleaning.

For example, a floor covered in dust? He loved the way the dust cloth turned black with the first wipe down. He loved drains that had gone dark and sticky from neglect. He loved putting down mold killer and going over to see what had happened after it sat for a while.

It made him shudder. He even liked sticking a toothbrush into a foul drain and pulling out the dirty clogs, and he liked scrubbing bath heaters proliferated with koji mold. And, to the point he could barely stand it, he liked squeaking his finger against it to check. *Is it clean?* Although he would say “Why did this happen?” a giddy smile he couldn’t hide would cross his face the moment he found black mold clogging a joint.

He couldn’t help but absolutely love his living space when it was clean. He scrubbed until you could lick everything without a second thought. He had acquired easy-to-use tools, made easy-to-do household chores, made it easy to clean, and kept things neat and tidy every day. It was what he loved from the bottom of his heart.

If someone were to ask him why he loved those things, he wouldn’t have an answer. There were people in the world who loved anime, people who loved games, and people who loved music, too. If there were also people who fell head over heels for entertainers, then why couldn’t someone fall in love with cleanliness?

In addition, Ryuuji’s private hobby was also perusing foreign interior decorating magazines. If he ever had money to spare, he wanted to eventually acquire luxurious, color coordinated fabrics and linens. That said, he could mostly satiate his desire to touch marvelously tasteful fabrics by going to Taiga’s condo to help with housework.

“It’s amazing...this is going to be a huge undertaking...” Without thinking, Ryuuji clasped his hands together like a maiden and looked up at the villa as though enchanted. To think the day would come when he would clean such a luxurious house...

As expected of the villa of Yuudzukire Reiko, the thirty-year-old coroner, it didn’t feel at all like new Japanese wealth. It was tasteful. The interior was probably just as luxuriously refined and yet, the dust must have

been accumulating, waiting for Ryuuji. He put his luggage on the wood deck and breathed out. *Ahh.*

“That’s fine... I’m fine with cleaning as much as we need to do...” he whispered to himself, low and hot. From his bag, he pulled out his personal dust cloth, which he regularly kept handy, and his Takasu stick (his version of the famous “Matsui stick” that could reach in narrow places to clean—Ryuuji’s was a chopstick and cotton square that he’d assembled).

Then, with his preparations complete, he turned back. *Now Kawashima, open the door, let me inside.*

“No way, no way, Ahmin. How can we clean when such a beautiful ocean is right in front of our eyes!”

Whaaat...?!

That unbelievable statement had come from the mouth of his beloved Minori.

Minori nimbly jumped over the wood railing of the deck and touched down on the beach. “Yahoo! Ocean, ocean, ocean! It’s the oceeeaaan!”

As she ran, she kicked off her sneakers and socks, throwing them to the side as she ran to the shoreline. She submerged herself in the ocean up to her ankles. “Ah, it’s cold! Aha ha, the waves are strong! I’m not gonna lose!”

In the spray that radiated in the intense summer sun, she faced the ominously approaching waves, smiled, and gave them a small kick. “Everyone! Hurry up! Come on!” She waved at them.

Ami also quickly took off her sandals and rolled up her jeans. “It looks nice! I’m going in, too!”

“We’ll save cleaning for later!” Even Kitamura was in his bare feet and running. *Ah, it’s cold.*

They shouted joyously.

“Hey, hey, hey! Shouldn’t we clean first?!” Ryuuji, the heretic, said. His voice was blown away by the sea breeze. How terrible. He turned around. There was one person left behind on the deck. She couldn’t swim and didn’t seem to have much interest in the ocean.

“All right, Taiga! You’re here! Hey, hey, don’t you think you want to clean more than go play in the ocean?! Of course you do! Starting right now, we can polish up that plan while the two of us clean...”

But when he took a step towards her, she nimbly avoided him just as though he were dirty.

“I don’t want to, don’t come near me!” she said. “You have perverted eyes.”

“What...?”

“Gross.”

Taiga’s narrow gaze was filled to the brim with contempt as she turned her face away from Ryuuji and completely, coldly ignored him. She pulled off her small sandals with great effort and ran toward everyone else at the shoreline.

“Oh, she’s here! Taiga, come over here! There’s a tooooooon of fish!”

“What, where? I want to see! Ugh, it’s cold!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine once you get used to it!”

As she lifted the hem of her skirt, Taiga exposed her white shins and timidly entered the water. She held onto Minori’s arm.

Ryuuji was all by his lonesome. Left alone while everyone was laughing. They seemed to be having fun.

Being left behind because he’d rather be cleaning wouldn’t do. Ryuuji didn’t want to spoil the mood that had just formed. He descended the wood deck reluctantly, though he turned back to the villa several times. He wasn’t exactly excited as he wrestled with his shoes, trying to at least get barefoot at the boisterous shoreline.

Cold water sprayed his face. “Uwah! Puh!”

“Yaaay!”

Ryuuji licked his lips. They were offensively salty, and his nose hurt, and salt had gotten in his eyes.

Ami laughed. “Look, Takasu-kun, let’s play together here!”

“Play? ...Uh-puh, why you!”

“Ho ho ho, hurry up, hurry up~!” As she beckoned him, her white hand mercilessly dashed water all over Ryuuji’s clothes. Her smile was sweet as an angel’s, and her inviting voice was like a breeze. “There, there, there~!” She aimed precisely for his eyes and nose, undoubtedly displaying her black-hearted and ill nature.

“Damn it... now you’ve done it!”

“Aah!”

Ryuuji wouldn’t hold back. He wouldn’t give her a handicap. He’d give it back to her twice as hard. As she laughed, Ami tried to run away by stepping back into the ocean. The spray glittered in the midsummer sunshine and the hem of Ryuuji’s shorts was awash in the waves. Before he knew it, his skin was baking in the sun.

“Stop, it’s cold! It’s cold!”

Ami laughed as she ran away. If you ignored her personality for the moment, with her jeans rolled up to expose her knees, she looked like she’d stepped out of a soft drink or sports drink commercial. They splashed each other and laughed.

This kind of actually feels like summer, Ryuuji started to think. Even his lust for cleaning had disappeared. Even the solid cumulous clouds bubbling in the blue sky enhanced this summer scene.

Before he realized it, he was laughing, his voice raised, as he chased Ami. He couldn’t tell the difference between his sweat and the ocean water.

“I told you it’s cold! Really, Takasu-kun, you’re mean~!”

And then...

“I see, I see, it’s cold. It’s that cold.”

“Ah! Stop! Ahh...ah?!”

“Are the wharf roaches that cold?”

“Ugh...gyaaaaaaAAAAAAAHAH!!!!”

At some point, Taiga had come up behind Ryuuji to pursue Ami. She was tossing the wharf roaches stuck on the nearby boulders at her. The wharf roaches immediately clung to Ami’s white tank top.

“You spoiled brat, what do you think you’re doing?!” Ami snapped, her face like an ogress mask as she promptly started throwing the wharf roaches she had accumulated back at Taiga.

“Shut up, take the wharf roaches, you dumb Chihuahua!”

“The wharf roaches suit you better, you pipsqueak!”

This unseemly, ominous battle unfolded across the midsummer ocean scene.

Whoa... Ryuuji decided to run out of fear.

“Hey, hey! We’re on a trip, so why are you fighting?!” The one who had the courage to break them up was none other than the class representative of justice, Kitamura Yuusaku himself. But the two were still tossing wharf roaches, and they simply stuck to Kitamura’s shirt when he stood between them.

“Uwah, wait aren’t these... how are you two touching these?!” he cried. “I’m a little... I can’t deal with them, take them off... Ami! Take them off!”

“No! Yuusaku, that’s gross! Don’t come near me!”

“What?! Then Aisaka, you take them off!”

“Uh... S-sorry...”

“Why not?! Take them off! Weren’t you two just touching them with your bare hands?!”

Even as he said that, it seemed that getting chased by a boy covered in wharf roaches was too gross for them. Though he felt bad about it, Ryuuji couldn’t even look straight at Kitamura. They were even hanging off his glasses...

Eventually, as they screamed and tried to get away from the pleading, glasses-wearing, wharf-roach-encrusted boy, the two girls ran aimlessly side by side down the shoreline. It seemed in a situation like this, they were in sync.

“Aha ha, they’re stupid! I can’t believe they grabbed those wharf roaches.” Minori appeared beside him with her dazzling smile, laughing as she watched the chase unfold.

“Y-yeah.”

“Well, I’m the kind of girl to grab sea cucumbers, though.”

Without hesitation, she showed the sea cucumbers in her hands to Ryuuji, though Ryuuji jerked his head back automatically.

“That’s...amazing?!” he said.

“Oceans where there are sea cucumbers are clean oceans. They filter the water. They’re also tasty.” Minori was in a good mood, in a very good mood. She put sea cucumbers in her hands together for no reason and said, “Cross bone.” Then, with a *splash*, she returned them to the water.

“Aha ha, my hands smell like the ocean!” Minori sniffed at her hands, grinned, and laughed.

Ryuuji couldn’t help but smile at her natural, carefree attitude. “Hey, Kushieda, sometimes...”

“What?”

He couldn’t forget the goal of that trip. In times like this, he needed to corner her as much as he could, little by little. “Don’t you think that thing floating over there looks like a human head?”

“Uh!”

He pointed. It was just seaweed floating in the ocean—it probably didn’t look like a human head even if you were looking for one. But he was sure Minori was delusional enough that she would make it a bigger and bigger deal all on her own. She would scare herself.

Just as planned, as Minori looked at it, her whole body erupted in goosebumps. “Guh...gyah! A body... a *body*! That means that this ocean water is filled with the essence of decomposing corpses... uwahh!”

She tried to somersault away, lost her balance, and grabbed onto Ryuuji’s arm. She put her weight on him. Her palm was hotter than he thought it would be.

“A-are you okay?!” he asked.

For a moment, he felt like life was being choked out of him. A shiver ran from the back of his neck, down his spine, and all the way to his butt. This was a little... no, this was good.

“It’s not okay!” Minori said. “We’re being soaked in corpse essence right noooooow!” Her face reached peak redness and she actually looked really scared, though she had just been smiling so brightly.

As expected, Ryuuji felt a little guilty being the only one who was thrilled. “S-sorry for saying something so weird,” he finally said, exposing it for what it was. “That’s actually seaweed.”

“Dagyaah! It’s a seaweed *coooooorpse!*”

Half-crouched, Minori once again turned a somersault and rolled onto the wet sand. Based on what she was saying, the supermarket would be filled with fish corpses and a whole bunch of other dead bodies, he thought, but he didn’t have time to console her as Minori sprinted to the wood deck. From a slight distance, Ami was staring at him, half-shocked.

They had just barely finished the prologue of their plan and Minori was already completely ensnared in their trap.

Chapter 3

“**H**ey, Takasu, Ami has a moped, so she said to go shopping right now. Do you want to ride together while the girls are cleaning...?”

“Hm?”

For a moment, Kitamura looked petrified behind his glasses at the look on Ryuuji’s raised face.

Ryuuji had a Takasu-stick in his right hand. In his left, he had a bottle he brought from home. He had a dry washcloth at his waist, and a bucket and a wet washcloth beside him. He was on all fours, had his own rubber gloves on, and was in the middle of scrubbing the foreign-made kitchen sink to Takasu standards of lickability.

He got up and took off the rubber gloves to answer Kitamura’s question. “What? What did you just say?”

“Uh, no...it’s fine. You’re being really...thorough about cleaning up, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s worthwhile.” Ryuuji exhaled as he sat on the floor, legs folded under him. He took another look around him with pulsing bloodshot eyes that seemed dangerous at first glance. His tongue rolled out to lick his lips—they were just dry.

This villa was even more spectacular than he had expected. It was a two-story building. On the first floor, there was a fireplace in the living room that seemed easily bigger than twenty tatami mats. Next to it was a dining room with a view of the beach and, separated from it by a counter, the kitchen with its own table that seemed like it could be as big as six tatami mats. The second floor supposedly had five-bedrooms and there were supposed to be toilets and showers on both floors.

“Kawashima had said it was a five bedroom or something...it’s amazing, I think my place is smaller than that living room alone.”

“When Ami was living next to me, her house used to be even bigger than this. Her condo in the heart of the city is supposed to be much, much

bigger than this, too. I don't understand why. Anyway, they're like celebrities or something."

"I guess they are..."

The two boys put their hands to their faces and hummed like middle-aged women as they gazed against their better judgment at the undeniably tall ceiling. A fan whirled above their heads like one in a house in an overseas soap opera. This really was a different world. Neither Ryuuji or Kitamura could even understand why that fan was there. They sighed absently.

"Yuusaku, here, this is the key. What are you going to do? Are you going shopping with Takasu-kun?" Ami peeked her head out from the door.

What do you mean by shopping? Ryuuji was the only one who hadn't been able to follow the conversation.

"No, it looks like Takasu's cleaning enthusiastically, so I'll go by myself."

"What? There's no way you can do that. There isn't a basket, and it's not a scooter, so you can't put anything by your feet. It doesn't even have a luggage rack you can tie things down to, so you need someone to hold stuff for you."

"Then will you come?"

"If I'm not here, nobody will know anything about the villa."

I see... As soon as Ryuuji grasped the flow of the conversation, he raised his hand. "Go with Taiga," he said. "She can't clean, so she wouldn't be useful here. Heeey, Taigaaa!"

"What? What are you shouting for?"

"Whoa!"

Taiga was a lot closer than he had expected and surprised him.

He didn't know whether she was cleaning the floor, simply sitting, or had gathered wind of Kitamura's presence and stealthily approached, but for some reason, she was on all fours on the floor, her head poking out from between Ami's long legs.

"What are you doing?! Don't stick your head through weird places!"

In defiance of Ami's shrieks, like a regular customer flipping up the doorway curtain of a restaurant to ask, *You still open?* Taiga put her hand on the inside of Ami's knee and casually looked up only at Ryuuji.

"No, Kitamura is looking for someone to go shopping with him, so I thought it might be good if you went."

In sync with Ryuuji's words, Kitamura waved the jangling keys Ami had given him in front of his face. "Yeah, want to come?" he asked. "It'll feel nice to go up that mountain road we just came down on a moped."

"Uh!"

Taiga suddenly stiffened like she'd gone into rigor mortis, her mouth shrinking into a small triangle. Her round cheeks were like peaches, and her eyes tipped up into sharp slits. That was Taiga's expression of astonishment, nervousness, and delight. *Right, right*, Ryuuji nodded to himself. Sitting with Kitamura on a moped, touring the beachside... she probably couldn't have fathomed this situation even in her dreams. What a nice assist. No matter what happened, he would end up helping Taiga out like this. But well, if that was the natural way things progressed, it wasn't like he could do anything about it.

"I-I can't."

"What?!"

Ryuuji, drunk on his own goodwill, turned with an expression like an ogre unintentionally washing over his face. He wasn't mad—he was surprised. Why was she throwing out his support? Why was she throwing out the chance he had just given her?

Unaware of Ryuuji's thoughts, Taiga pressed her face against Ami's calves. She shyly hid her face as though she were the big sister in a poverty-stricken household peeking from behind the shadow of a tree at her younger brother, who was aiming to become a star of the Giants baseball team, and their slightly paranoid father.

"I'm scared of mopeds," Taiga said. "So I can't."

"Wait, you..."

She unconsciously kneaded Ami's butt and then backed off when Ami twisted in discomfort. Taiga shyly pressed against the wall. "I think

Minorin would go, so I'll call her. Miiinoooooriiinnn," she said as she stepped away into the hall.

Did that mean Taiga wasn't just letting go of her opportunity but also getting rid of Ryuuji's chance to talk to Minorin? *What does she think she's doing?* Ryuuji quickly got up and went after Taiga. He grabbed her elbow and pulled her back.

"Wait a sec! Why are you doing this?!" he asked in a low voice that Kitamura and Ami wouldn't hear from the kitchen.

"Aren't you noisy?!"

"Fuh-gah!"

She gave him a sharp elbow to the stomach. He fell to his knees wordlessly. With the frozen gaze of a saber-toothed tiger whose corpse had been found in the bottom of eternal ice, Taiga looked down on Ryuuji.

"I have my reasons," she said. "Unlike you, I'm acting systematically and logically."

"Y-you were just being shy. I saw all of it...oof!" *PSHT!* He got a slap on the mouth.

"A mosquito. There was a mosquito."

It seemed getting more out of her was out of the question now.

Shopping? I'll go, I'll go! The carefree Minorin threw aside her Quickie Wiper and straddled the moped with Kitamura as they aimed towards the supermarket near the station. "Let's become the wind," she muttered as they left.

Taiga lowered her voice as she sneakily watched them from the front door that lead to the wood deck.

"Okay? From now until Minorin comes back, we're going to look for a place we can use for the plan, like an attic or a place where we can get into Minorin's room through the window. We're going to check all the places in this villa where we can hide or surprise Minorin. You're a dog, so you'll probably be good at this."

Ryuuji nodded, pretending he hadn't heard the insult she nonchalantly tacked on. "I see, okay. But if Kawashima catches us, that means trouble. Actually, where did Kawashima go?"

He looked around but didn't see any sign of her.

Taiga huffed and shrugged her shoulders. "I dunno. If she catches us, we'll figure out how to trick her when the time comes."

Hurry up and get going. She slapped Ryuuji on the back insistently. Although what she said was clearly off the cuff and not at all logical, they didn't have any other ideas at hand. Still being pressed on, he returned to the villa.

"You go look around the second floor," Taiga said. "In order starting next to the stairs, it's Kitamura-kun's room, your room, my room, Minorin's room, and then Dimhuahua's room. Dimhuahua was saying that earlier as she was carrying the sheets or whatever in."

"Got it. And you're doing the first floor, right? There were cockroaches, so be careful."

"What...?"

Leaving behind Taiga, whose unsettled expression was starting to set, Ryuuji went up the stairs to the second floor. *It's fine, Taiga would win in a fight against a cockroach.*

He admired the wide pine boards of the floor, the spacious hallway, and the row of south-facing doors once again as he walked. He felt like the whole thing was more tasteful by far than a small, garish hotel or motel.

Whether it was Taiga's house or Ami's, he knew there were people in the world who were richer than you could imagine. The thought of his own snug rental came to mind, and Ryuuji softened his footsteps as he headed to Minori's room. He snuck in and checked whether it was possible to knock on her windows from the outside. If he had time, he wanted to even go up to the attic.

Taiga and Ryuuji intended to scare Minori out of her wits. Of course, he felt sorry for her, but if he didn't scare her thoroughly that day and the next, he'd barely get any results when he showed up as her knight. It was all in the name of avoiding his future as a kowtowing dog with puppies, so

there was no way around it. It was incredibly selfish, but unrequited love wasn't anything but selfishness in the first place, anyway. It was just a way to trick yourself into selfish delusions and convenient misconceptions. Though his guilt didn't conveniently disappear when his thoughts turned serious.

Going all the way into the room was a little bit like being a stalker. *But, she hasn't unpacked, and I wasn't going to touch her personal things, and it's just for a little bit.* He justified it to himself again and again as he continued down the hallway.

"Huh? What was this room?"

Opposite the southern rooms were two unfamiliar doors in line with the stairs. He gently opened one of them. *Oh*, Ryuuji shrugged his shoulders. He hadn't checked it yet, but this was the restroom. *I'll clean this later, too.* He pointed at the toilet. *Be prepared.*

In that case, this is the shower. He opened the door and peeked inside.

"Hm? Seriously?"

The lights were on and shining brightly in the changing area where the laundry machines were. It wasn't like Ryuuji was footing the electricity bill, but it was in his nature not to allow meaningless waste. Though he thought of turning it off, he didn't know where the switch was. It was probably in the back where the half-open glass door was. He stepped in and looked around. There was a sink and a closed shower curtain around the bathtub. He found the switch along the wall next to the glass door.

For a moment, he thought, *That's strange.* For some reason or other, it felt humid—but of course that couldn't be the case, and he erased the incongruity from his mind. Then, as he turned off the light switch...

"Ah?!"

"Oh, sorry! ...Huh?"

It was a girl's shriek. Reflexively, Ryuuji turned the lights back on and tilted his head. *Who was that...?*

"Seriously, is that you, Takasu-kun? Could you *not* walk in on a girl's shower?"

...It came from the other side of the shower curtain.

...The sound of a turning faucet, the dripping of a shower.

...The rising temperature.

...The owner of the voice was Ami.

Uh.

“Ahhh, I-I-I-I-I’m sorry! I didn’t notice...ahh!”

“Ho ho...♥”

A pale arm stretched from the other side of the still-closed shower curtain. Ryuuji frantically averted his eyes and tried to run away, but, for some reason, the wet hand firmly grasped his arm, pulling him with amazing strength. Ryuuji’s feet slipped futilely against the tiles like spinning wheels.

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you...?!”

“Heeey.” Ami’s voice, high and sweet like a kitten’s, filled the small shower room. “Takasu-kun, you’re so bold. I had no idea... did you come to take what you want?”

“No! It wasn’t on purpose! I didn’t know!”

“You’re saying that again...you don’t need an excuse, you know? No one’s watching in here. We’re completely alone...”

“Are you stupid?!”

From behind the still closed curtain, he heard an indistinct, quiet laugh. Ami was a demon. Still firmly holding Ryuuji, with a voice that seemed to cast a spell of immobility, her whisper continued to thrum, melting and sickly sweet. “You’re not happy? I’d keep it a secret from Yuusaku and that jealous tiger...from Minori-chan. It’ll be a secret...”

“Waaah!”

The curtain fluttered. Through the thin fabric, he saw a shadow slowly stand. *Wait a second, please wait.* Ryuuji, who felt like he was going to die and not sure what was happening, covered his eyes desperately with his other hand.

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you thinking?!”

“It’s fine...Takasu-kun, if this is what you want...”

“I don’t! I don’t!”

“Are you sure? Hey, are you sure? ...Do you really not want this?”

“What am I supposed to want?!”

“This!”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

“...Ah?”

Ami flung the shower curtain fully aside and looked down at Ryuuji as he desperately averted his face and eyes. He shrieked as he fell on his butt.



“...Puh-ha!” The demon’s cheeks inflated as she snorted vigorously. “Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha haaa!” She laughed, as inhumane as a machine gun firing at the idiot sitting with his legs trapped under him, unable to stand.

“Wh-wha...*wha*?”

Standing in the sudsy bathtub was Ami, writhing with wicked laughter. She was almost crying as she jumped for joy, amused as she pointed at Ryuuji’s pitiful form.

“Nooo waaaay! Taaakaaasuuuu-kuuun?! What you were expecting?! That face...ah ha ha ha ha! It’s super funny! A masterpiece! Aha ha ha ha ha!”

She was in a T-shirt and jeans, holding a sponge, and pounding her hand gleefully against the wall.

“You...wh-what were you doing?”

“Cleaning. The. Tub. ♥ I was thinking I could switch with you, Takasu-kun, since you love cleaning.”

“Oh, Ryuuji! How was the second floor? I found a ladder that goes up to the attic... what?”

The amount of shock, suffering, and embarrassment Ryuuji had gone through was unbearable. He caught Taiga on the landing while fleeing down the stairs, and tried to communicate using body language to tell her what had happened. His slanted, psychotic, sanpaku eyes were bloodshot, and he was on the verge of tears. If he’d been talking to anybody but Taiga, he might have been arrested on the spot, prosecuted, and found guilty.

“What? Mmm hmm... Dimhuahua did *what*? Completely? She pretended like she was taking a shower? Herself...to you? She teased you? She showed herself to you naked. To pretend to seduce you.”

How he had conveyed that to her so well was a mystery, but Ryuuji pinched his earlobe and deeply nodded to say, “Exactly like that.”

“Well, what happened? Did you go look at Minorin’s room?”

He shook his head “no” vigorously.

“You’re useless!” she jeered at him.

Ryuuji was already dejected, and as he pitifully backed against the wall, his hand unconsciously crept towards his back pocket for his phone. If he called right now, Yasuko would answer. Maybe she’d let him talk to Inko-chan...

“Don’t ask for someone to comfort you!” Taiga snapped. “You really are useless. Why are you putting yourself at the mercy of someone like Dimhuahua?! Seriously, fine, I got it. I’ll go look and have a word with her, too!”

He had no idea if talking to her would do anything, but Ryuuji, at that moment, wanted to leave it all to Taiga. *Yeah, go tell her, go have a word or a thousand with that demon. Go complain or curse her.* Pitiful? Call it whatever you want. It was obvious Ryuuji’s manly pride and naivete had been mercilessly smashed.

Taiga narrowed her eyes and ran up the stairs.

“Hey! Dimhuahua!” she shouted. She sounded incredibly in charge to Ryuuji as he waited on the first floor.

Rattle. He heard the sliding door open and then a shriek. He sensed an argument—and then silence.

The strained silence continued for a short while, until even Ryuuji started to wonder what had happened.

“I-I can’t believe it. Seriously, what is it, what was that...” Ami grumbled as she came down the stairs. She was wearing sweats now, unlike before. Irritated, she brushed Ryuuji aside on the landing as though to send him flying. Her wet hair smelled sweet.

...Her wet hair?

Then Taiga came down after her.

“Wh-What happened?!” Ryuuji asked.

Taiga was dripping wet, and, on top of that, she had a distinct, red handprint on her cheek. Her eyes were frozen wide, like a cat that had been grazed by a car. “...Dimhuahua really was taking a bath,” she said.

“You don’t have to say any more than that!” Ami snapped at her, turning. Ryuuji was afraid to ask what had happened. All he knew was that Taiga was cross-eyed.

“T-Taiga? Keep it together, what did you see?” he asked.

“Ryuuji, um... Dimhuahua was like BAM! And...” She opened her right hand around her right breast. “BAM! And...” She opened her left hand at her left breast and then, finally, opened up both her hands together on the bottom half of her body. “...BAAAM! Like that.”

Ami leaped back toward them, practically suspended in the air. “I told you to stop!” She karate-chopped Taiga’s head.

The Palmtop Tiger would normally never allow something like that without retaliation, but Taiga was still slightly stunned. She stumbled to the phone table, where she picked up a memo pad and pencil.

“Ryuuji,” she said. “Um...Dimhuahua is like this here...and this part’s really abnormal...and right here, it’s like BAM!”

“Don’t draw me naked!”

The illustration was so bad it became very realistic. Ami snatched it and tore it to pieces.

It took thirty minutes for Taiga to come back to her senses.

Almost an hour later, they heard the sound of the moped braking out front.

“We’re back! Heeey, Takasu-kuuun!”

Ryuuji raised his head from the silverware he was polishing like a faithful dog. Minori had really called him.

He sprinted down the long hallway in his slippers to the front door, where her voice had come from.

“Sorry, sorry, could you help me carry this?” she asked.

“Whoa, don’t you think you bought too much?!”

“You think so? But it’s five people’s meals for tonight, three meals tomorrow, and hopefully for the morning the day after. And oolong tea and seasonings and stuff.”

“We can’t leave anything behind.”

“We’ll just have to eat it all. Oh, oh.”

Minori dragged four bags stuffed with groceries across the wood deck. *Clack*. The more breakable things on the bottom clanked and Ryuuji rushed over to take the bags from her.

“Don’t drag them,” he said. “Seriously, what’s Kitamura doing?”

“He said he’d put away the moped. Sorry, I’ll carry that. What are Taiga and Ahmin doing?”

“Kawashima’s in hysterics on the phone with her parents since the TV isn’t working right. Taiga is...in the restroom, I guess. Let’s move all of these to the kitchen in one go.”

Right. Minori nodded, and Ryuuji felt as happy and embarrassed as a newlywed. *Hee hee...* In order to hide his softening expression, he rose and brought the heavier bags to the kitchen. He couldn’t just let himself be overcome by momentary happiness and do nothing. It was fine—he hadn’t forgotten their goal.

Of course, they had everything prepared—Taiga hadn’t peeked into Ami’s bath for nothing. Ryuuji confirmed the faint creak from the ceiling and casually calculated the distance. *It’ll be right around here*.

“Oh, could you leave the groceries there for a minute?” he asked. “I’ll separate the stuff we’re putting in the fridge.”

“There ya go.” Minori said.

He casually stopped Minori right before she entered the kitchen. Minori crouched in the hallway and started rummaging through the bags.

“Uhh...can sauces be in room temperature? Curry roux is...room temp. What about you, onion?”

Ryuuji knelt beside her, pretending to look into the bags. As Minori looked down, he watched her unexpectedly smooth cheeks and glossy hair. Her scalp was slightly sunburned where her hair parted, and her upper lip

thinned out as she pouted. *She really is cute—no, wait. This isn't the time for this.*

His throat was dry from nerves, but he cleared it casually.

“K-Kushieda. Does this need to be refrigerated? Hey, do you think it says so somewhere?”

“Hm? Let me see, could I have that? Um...”

He handed the can of tomato puree (*there's no way this thing would go in the fridge*) to Minori and had her read the fine print. Minori's eyes flickered, going back and forth as she huffed and narrowed them.

“Eek?!” she suddenly shrieked.

“Hm? What's wrong?” Ryuuji casually asked her as he pretended to be surprised while he raised his head.

“I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I...”

Minori had turned into Inagawa Junji, the radio host who told ghost stories. Her eyes went wide, her face was scared stiff, and she frantically turned to look between Ryuuji and herself.

“I-I-I-I-I, j-just...just now, there was some-something behind me... I-It, whoa... what was that?”

She looked around as though she was searching for something and roughly pushed back her bangs as if she wanted to say she didn't believe it. She looked at Ryuuji again as though for confirmation.

“You must have been imagining it,” he said. “There wasn't anything behind you.”

“...”

“Did something happen?” he asked.

“No... nothing... it was...nothing, I guess. Maybe I was...mistaken? Right... that muuust be iiit, it muuust be,” Minori sang as though talking to herself. Her face remained petrified. Slapping her cheeks, she lowered her eyes to the can once more.

It was behind her.

The setup was happening one more time. Of course, Ryuuji could see it.

One board of the ceiling was slightly shifted, and from a gap in that dark space, a fresh piece of seaweed from the beach was making its way down to the back of Minori's neck from a string. The seaweed was tied into a pom pom and heading towards the collar of defenseless Minori's parka. Finally, the slippery, soft tip of it shrugged against her skin. Naturally, that primitive contraption was powered by Taiga in the attic. According to Taiga, the seaweed was apparently, "Dimhuahua the First, a floating faux-spirit." He hadn't even felt like telling her to cut it out.

"Uh..."

Jolt. Minori's expression froze. Slowly, slowly she turned to look behind her. Of course, Dimhuahua the First was quickly being hauled back up and had disappeared without a trace.

"What is it, Kushieda?"

Sorry... he thought even as he looked at her dubiously. Minori gaped as she pointed in the wrong direction and her gaze wandered.

"J-Just now, something definitely really did touch me. It was like slimy or slippery...like...seaweed? That's what it seemed like..."

That's because it is seaweed...

"...Like the hair of a corpse that seems like seaweed... it was like the soul of a living thing that was killed by being wrapped in seaweed... A sea otter, maybe? If it was wrapped in seaweed, maybe it was a sea otter? A sea otter corpse? A sea otter with scallop corpses filling its skin pouches?!"

There it is. Ryuuji sighed. As expected, Minori had the endless ability to inflate the truth and make anything spooky. Eventually, her front teeth started chattering.

"I-It's wet..." she said. "It's wet where it touched me! This smell is..." *Sniff.* She touched the back of her neck where the seaweed liquid was and sniffed her hand. "Gyaah! It really does smell like seaweeeeeeeeeeed!"

You're completely right, though.

"H-hey!"

“It’s the corpse of a sea otter! It’s the curse of the seaweeeeeeeeed!”

As though she had touched something unclean, she stretched her hand away from herself. Minori sprinted down the hallway. To think she was this scared by something that small... Ryuuji said a hearty prayer of thanks as he watched her back.

Eventually, Minori’s footsteps grew distant.

“I kind of feel guilty...” he said.

Of course, the pale face that emerged from the widened gap in the ceiling was Taiga’s. As she scrubbed the dust off herself, she looked down at Ryuuji.

“If you do stuff like this, you’ll end up in hell,” she said, sounding vaguely similar to a horoscope.

“But you’re the one who committed the crime!”

“You’re the ringleader. Well, I’ll go clean up Dimhuahua the First. I wonder if I could jump down from here?”

“That’s rude. And don’t do that, it’s dangerous.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Taiga said as she pushed the board even further aside and pulled her head back in. Then the bottoms of her feet slid down from the ceiling. “It would be a hassle to use the ladder to come back down.”

“Hey, wait...are you serious? Don’t fall.”

“Stop. I’m not that clumsy.”

She would fall. And this was how it was going to happen.

Ryuuji was confident. He waited with his arms stretched directly below Taiga to support her just in case something happened as she lowered herself. Taiga’s bare feet kicked as though measuring the distance to the floor. Eventually, her lower half slowly crawled out of the gap in the ceiling tiles.

“Ugh...”

What was that sound? He didn’t have time to ask.

Slip! Taiga dropped ten centimeters all at once. Before she could fall, Ryuuji grabbed her bare feet and saved her from dropping to the floor.

“Uh-Uh-Uh...this might...be bad,” Taiga said. “My hands are slipping!”

Her armpit caught precariously on the ceiling tile, leaving Taiga to support her body with her arms alone. She struggled, her feet kicking futilely, urgency filling her voice.

“I-I can’t go up or down anymore...” she said.

“Look, didn’t I tell you?! I’ll hold on to you, so just let go!”

“N-no!”

“Why not?!”

“Because then you’ll see my underwear, you perverted dog! What kind of scary guy tries to panty peep at a time like this?!”

“You’re the one who’s scary! I’m not even thinking of the ‘u’ in underwear!”

Even though he was holding onto her, Taiga tried to kick Ryuuji, her bare feet slapping him on the cheek. Just when he was thinking he should just leave her like this, he heard voices.

“Y-yeah! There really was a seaweed ghost!”

“A seaweed ghost~? What’s that?”

“It might have been Ishidata Tetsuo’s ghost.”

“Oh~? Who is that? One of your relatives, Minori-chan?”

“If it wasn’t that, then it’s a sea otter spirit.”

“Sea otter spirit~? That’s kind of cute, isn’t it~?”

Fwoosh. Ryuuji’s face went blue. His sanpaku eyes sloped until they were terrifically narrow. He wasn’t planning on strangling the two girls who were approaching with seaweed—he was so flustered he thought he might vomit his heart out.

“Wah, this is bad this is bad this is bad this is bad...”

Naturally, Minori and Ami were the ones approaching. Possibly hearing them, Taiga's feet struggled furiously. She hesitated, and then at the last minute, tried to get back into the attic. As Ryuuji panicked and supported her bare feet with his fully outstretched hands to try to return Taiga to the attic, she showered his face with footprints.

"Hurry up, hurr...gah!"

Schwump! Taiga was so hurried that she dropped her flashlight. It hit him square in the nose. As he collapsed in agony, Taiga pulled herself up and replaced the ceiling tile with a thump.

"Uhh, where is the ghost of that Tetsuo-san or whatever?" Ami asked. "It's just Takasu-kun sitting there. Actually, Takasu-kun, what are you doing?"

"Huh, that's weird..." Minori said. "Takasu-kun, what's wrong?"

"Uh, I-I'm just a little..."

It's nothing. However, the moment the two of them turned around, simultaneous, superhuman shrieks erupted from Minori and Ami.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

What just happened? He put his hand on his aching nose as though nothing were wrong.

"...Whoa!"

Slip! He was of course surprised to find something wet and slippery there. When he looked at it, his hand was red and slick. His nose was gushing blood. Maybe this was payback... He couldn't make up an excuse for what had happened and ran wordlessly into the kitchen to wash his face and hands.

"Takasu-kun, what happened?!" Minori asked. "Did the seaweed ghost attack you?!"

Ryuuji couldn't even give an honest response to Minori's question as she karate-chopped his neck in concern. He desperately washed the dripping blood away and pinched his nose, looking up.

Ami also seemed astonished as she looked at Ryuuji's face. "Anyway, here's a tissue!" she said. "What in the world happened?! Ah,

could it be *that thing* that happened earlier was too stimulating for you?”

Ho ho ♥, she whispered, unable to read the room.

He did his best to pretend not to hear. “No. I picked my nose too hard.”

“Are you an elementary schooler?!”

His joke seemed to have both hurt Ami’s pride and embarrassed her. In order to keep Minori from seeing, he hunched his back and stuck a tissue gently up his nose. *Ahh, the self-loathing...this is the worst...the worst...*

“Hey, what’s going on, why are you all together?” Kitamura’s refreshing voice chimed in.

“Oh, well Takasu-kun got a nosebleed from the seaweed. Whaaaat’s going oooooonn?!” Minori shrieked unexpectedly, her voice cracking.

Ami and Ryuuji turned to look at Kitamura. They were speechless.

“Aha-ha.”

“This isn’t something to laugh about!”

“I tried putting the moped away in the shed, but it was a little tight, so I tried moving the equipment in there around...and got a little caught up.”

Kitamura was laughing. His whole body was covered in dirty oil. Even his glasses looked like sunglasses. His cheeks and elbows were scraped, the cuts faintly tinged with blood. It completely overshadowed Ryuuji’s nosebleed.

“No way! Yuusaku, are you okay?!”

Ami and Ryuuji held up tissues and pushed them towards Kitamura, who seemed like he was in critical condition.

Taiga finally appeared. “What’s with this racket? What in the world happened?” When she saw Kitamura, who looked like an oil-slicked bird, and Ryuuji with his doubled-up nose plugs, her forehead wrinkled in surprise.

“Ha-choo!” She sneezed heartily.

They did a double take.

“Whoa...whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa...Taiga, you got it plenty, too! What happened?!”

“Huh? Uhh, well there was a little... ha-choo! I was cleaning and... achoo! Then, a ton of dust irritated my nose... hack-choo! ...Waah...choo! ...Haa...”

Slurp. She sniffled pitifully and rubbed at her reddened eyes. Her hair, clothes, hands, feet, and her small body were completely covered with an unspeakable amount of dust bunnies. After losing her flashlight, crawling out of the attic had obviously been a mess. Every slight movement of her body must have dislodged dust. Every time she tried to sneeze, *FWOOSH!* The dust must have scattered like the flowers on the splash page of a shoujo manga.

“...Everyone’s weird! You’re aaaallll weird!” Ami said, flatly.

Kitamura handed the tissues to Taiga, whose nose was dripping more and more.

In that situation, they couldn’t really say, *It’s okay. So are you.*

Because they had been busy with their own activities as soon as they reached the villa—making a fuss in the ocean, going on a cleaning spree, shopping, manufacturing Dimhuahua the First, being attacked by Dimhuahua the First—they didn’t eat lunch until after four in the afternoon.

“What a pretty sunset...” Ryuuji said.

He stood alone in the sparkling kitchen he had scrubbed clean himself and turned his eyes to the window as though to escape from reality. His nosebleed had completely stopped and he had changed out of his smelly T-shirt. The sea breeze wafting in from the still open window was cool and pleasant. *Ahh...this really is a nice place.*

The sunlight coming through the window was, at long last, slanting calmly, and the horizon radiated a magnificent orange. He could hear only the sound of the waves and wind and the occasional seagull’s cry.

Even though it wasn't a city, the populated town Ryuuji lived in was a far cry from this. He wanted to invite the girl he liked on a walk, to turn his ear to the sounds of the waves, to slowly stroll along the beach as he spoke about plans for the future, but...

EIIIIIIIIII.

The shrill voice dragged Ryuuji back to reality.

"Let go! You spoiled brat!"

"No! I don't want it spicy! I don't want this roux!"

"You're so noisy. If you were going to be so stubborn, you should have gone shopping! This is fine! I like spicy! Here, you take it, Takasukun!"

"..."

Ami handed him the curry roux box, bringing him into the fight. And then...

"Whoa!"

His face scrunched in pain. Taiga had jumped, latching onto Ryuuji's arm and hanging from it. In an impressive feat of acrobatics, she pinched her bare legs around his legs and back.

"Nooooo!"

"Ow...ow!"

Like a monkey shaking a tree, she rocked him back and forth until he trembled, afraid his arm would come off.

"What is it?!" Ryuuji said. "What are you doing?! Why are you climbing on me?!"

"Ryuuji, you can make good curry without roux, right?! You did it before, didn't you?! You sauté wheat and mix in spices, and you can make it like that, can't you?! You should do that tonight, don't use this roux!"

You're so stubborn. Ami tried to pull Taiga off without waiting for Ryuuji's answer.

"It's easiest to make it using the roux," Ami said. "And it's good that way!"

“It’s waaaay better when Ryuuji makes it!”

After having them scream into his ears, having his arm pulled around, his body flailing this way and that, Ryuuji finally sank to his knees. He pulled Taiga off with one hand and pushed Ami away with the other.

“I got it!” he said. “I got it, okay! Taiga, my prized spice collection isn’t here, so I can’t create that flavor like I normally do.”

“What?!”

Uh huh. Ami snorted as if to say, *See, there.*

“But, well...you don’t like spicy things, right?” Ryuuji continued. “I’ll separate a small portion into a different pot for you and add a ton of milk and ketchup to make it sweet.”

“Uwh...” Taiga pouted, but at least she wasn’t yelling.

Ami took her place and puffed her cheeks, “You’re spoiling her!” Forehead furrowed, eyes narrowed, she put her hand on her hips like a child. “Takasu-kun, you’re giving Aisaka-san special treatment again! If you do that, girls won’t like you, you know?”

She had been putting on her usual nice girl act until that point. Even letting him see her mad had a craft to it. Ami took him by surprise when her lips contorted into a smirk, wickedness bubbling up in the back of her eyes. She lowered her voice until even Taiga couldn’t hear.

“Maybe even Minori-chan won’t like you,” Ami whispered.

“Wha...?!”

What’s she saying? His whole body became stiff as a board.

Ami was so close, her breath touched his ear. She continued her pursuit, her final blow like a verse in a song. “Oh, that really did get you flustered. Hmm...”

Her gaze flicked mockingly over him, looking Ryuuji’s body up and down. *Hmm.* The edge of her lip curled, and she smiled faintly.

“Takasu-kun, if you keep up that attitude, maybe I’ll tell Minori-chan that you got a glimpse of me in the shower...”

“B-but you weren’t taking a shower!”

“Oh ho. There’s no way to prove that now, is there?”

She let go of him and ran her hands through her hair. A devilish smile rested on her pale and beautiful features. She looked like a beauty, but she also looked twisted, maybe because her black heart was showing. Ryuuji was speechless. Why had it suddenly come to this? Did she know about his feelings for Minori?

Taiga inserted herself into the odd tension between them.
“...What did you say about Minorin?”

She compared Ryuuji and Ami’s faces suspiciously.

Ami said, “Nothing,” with her usual angelic smile, but Ryuuji just gulped. *Schwoop*.

On top of everything else, one more person jammed herself between Taiga and Ami.

“Did you call? Did someone call me?”

It was Minori—when had she gotten here? Her round eyes glittered innocently as she smiled at her friends. It seemed she hadn’t noticed Ami’s earlier remark.

Ryuuji surreptitiously licked his dry lips. “Oh, Minorin, do you feel better?”

“Yeah. I lay down in bed for a little while and felt better, so I thought I could help in the kitchen,” she said. “Hee hee hee, I want to see the rumored Takasu Fist of God, too. It’s said you can chop up an onion in ten seconds, Takasu-kun.”

Ahh. Ryuuji felt like bowing before Minori’s smile. Because he and Taiga had surprised Minori with Dimhuahua the First, she had been resting up until now. Even though the principal offender, the person who enacted the crime, and the model for Dimhuahua the First were all gathered in one place, she smiled charmingly at them all.

“Ten seconds is impossible, but...” Ryuuji averted his eyes quickly, nearly blinded by Minori’s brilliance, but he wanted to live up to her expectations. He skillfully grabbed three onions in one hand. “If I had fifteen seconds...”

“Whoa! You’re talking the talk! Then I’ve got to see your skill. What should I help with? Would you be fine being the head honcho for tonight’s meal, Takasu-kun?”

He wasn’t close to tears from the onion he hadn’t yet cut, but from that phrase—*what should I help with?* The words he longed for anyone to say to him had been uttered by the one person in the world he most wanted to say them. He turned without a second thought.

“Hm? What’s with your eyes?” Taiga asked.

He’d accidentally looked her way. Of course, she probably had zero intentions of helping, but she had plunked herself down on a chair. She toyed with a yogurt that had been left on the table as though she wanted to eat it, and Ami was trying to take it from her. In a way, Ryuuji wished just as badly that Taiga would say it, too, but it was different than Minori... which was fine. He would say it was fine.

“Th-then, Kushieda, you could...peel the potatoes maybe,” he said.

“Okay. I wonder if there’s a peeler? How many?” Minori stuck her hand into the bag and pulled two small potatoes out with her slender fingers.

Then it happened.

Plat plat. The sudden sound of uncovered feet approached the kitchen. “Ahh, I feel refreshed! Oh, so you’re starting to get dinner ready right away. I can’t help at all with cooking, but I can at least help get the dishes out. Just say the word!” *Plat!* Kitamura, who smelled of soap now that he’d showered away the oil, hit Ryuuji’s shoulder. But...

“H-Hey! You’re...”

“Yeah, it’s hot, hot... woops! Yeah, sorry, didn’t know there were girls.”

“Uh?!”

Turning at Kitamura’s voice, Taiga dropped the yogurt. As her chair fell directly behind her, she hit the back of her head against the wall and rolled to the ground. The color in her face changed strangely from red, to blue, to white, as though she had been poisoned. She looked for a place to

run away, moved along the wall and, in the end, hid herself behind Ami, though she'd been fighting her until then.

Ami, who hadn't noticed the state of affairs until now, twisted around at this nuisance. "Wait, what are you doing all of a...huh?!"

She blinked for a while, as though doubting her eyes. She stared carefully at her childhood friend, then, when the time was ripe, said, "Yuusaku, are you crazy?!"

Ryuuji wanted to wholeheartedly agree. Kitamura, without being shy about it, scratched at his wet face as he laughed, *hee hee hee*.

"I left my change of clothes in my room," Kitamura said. "I was about to go put them on."

"Why did you come here before you did?!"

"Well, I saw Takasu."

"Are you an idiot?!"

Ha ha ha, I didn't think you'd be here, too... The class chairperson, vice president of the student council, and softball club manager—*this* guy—laughed. What could he be hiding...? Actually, there wasn't much to hide. He was standing there, intimidating and reckless, displaying himself as he had been born, with just one towel covering his obscene bottom half. Even Ryuuji was jealous of Kitamura's thin, trim, sports-forged body, but this wasn't the time to say that. Kitamura was wearing even less than he had when he was in his swimsuit at the pool. From behind, his keister was probably fully exposed.

"T-Taiga, hold it together!"

"Fwah..."

Taiga, who had seen the idiot from behind him, was broken. The light left her eyes. She was in a compact fetal position and staring at the wall. She might have seen it—she might have seen the derriere on public display. Her fate was very closely tied with encountering other people naked, Ryuuji thought.

"You don't feel like an exhibitionist at all, do you?" Ami asked. "You're the worst." With the familiarity of old friends, she gazed coldly at Kitamura's naked body.

“Ho ho ho... Kushieda isn’t opposed to humoring the exhibitionist...” Minori muttered, nodding shallowly and raising her lowered face. “Narcissus, you bratty demigod! Give me your nudes!”

Hop! Like a grasshopper, Minori jumped to her side and onto the floor. *Fwoosh!* She slid onto her shoulder and rolled at the nudist Kitamura’s feet like she was breakdancing.

“What are you doing? Stop that! I said stop!”

“What do you mean, coming here in that getup, huh?! You can’t say you don’t want this. You can’t tell me to stop. You’re faking innocence! When in Rome, do as the Romans do; when in a nudist village, do as the nudists do. This is a spectacular photograph!”

Minori pulled her cell phone from her pocket and enthusiastically pointed the camera at him. He didn’t know whether she really was taking pictures, but whether he opened his legs or turned around to show them his butt, he wouldn’t forget how her quick words shamed him.

“N-now I’m embarrassed all of a sudden!”

His sense of shame awoken too late, Kitamura tried to retreat from the kitchen by bashfully backing away. And then...

Fwish.

“Uh!”

The towel concealing his obscenity fell to the ground. Ryuuji jumped to save the eyes of his favorite girl from being soiled. Amazingly, with his desperate dive, he hid Kitamura’s crotch with a plate.

“...I saw some kind of negative afterimage just then... It was kind of...black and...?” With a grim look, Minori pinched the corners of her eyes. She sat on the floor with her legs folded snugly beneath her and tilted her head.

“I-It was probably a seaweed ghost.” Hiding the nudist with his whole body, Ryuuji prayed. *Forget, forget.* Then he turned back to Minori.

“Kushieda, you’re done with everything here,” he said. “So you can go rest in your room for a while. Yeah, we’ll call you when the curry’s done.”

“Okay...? Maybe I’ll do that. The seaweed ghost’s impression is kind of shifting in my mind... it’s like it infected my eyes or something...”

Minori haltingly left the kitchen, her footsteps uncertain.

As soon as she left, Ryuuji’s eyes slanted up fiercely, like a brutal god. “You know, you’re really the worst! The worst!” He hit Kitamura’s bare butt with the plate (he could have Taiga use the plate later). “Did you just come on this trip to do stuff like that?! If you run for student council president, I definitely won’t vote for you!”

“I regret it!” Kitamura said.

Ryuuji kicked the guy he used to call a friend out of the kitchen and chased him to the second-floor rooms. *What kind of guy is he?* Ryuuji wanted to show this side of Kitamura to Maya or Nanako and the rest of Kitamura’s ardent fans. He really wanted them to know. The boy “with some quirks, but he’s really everyone’s favorite Maruo-kun” was *this* kind of idiot. He thought about his absent friends’ smiling faces. *Right, isn’t that right, Noto, Haruta.* The vision of them whirled around him as they whispered. *Yeah, that’s right Takasu... It’s weird that he’s the only one who’s popular... I can’t agree with that... That guy’s an idiot, too... no, he’s the one who’s an idiot... Yeah, right, that’s exactly how it is.*

“Seriously, damn that guy...”

As Ryuuji righted the trashcan and resumed peeling the onion, he couldn’t stop cursing. He had finally gotten a chance to stand beside Minori in the kitchen. He didn’t think Kitamura would have been the one to interfere.

“Ahh, I feel sorry for Minori-chan,” Ami muttered, nonchalantly. She didn’t sound at all sorry.

To vent his anger, he half turned. “Kawashima, you help. I lost a hand because of your childhood friend’s blunder.” He jerked his chin and indicated the potatoes Minori had left in progress.

“Huh?” It took her 0.1 seconds to respond. Ami’s face scrunched, and he wanted to tell her, *well you don’t have to make that face at me.*

She twisted to look into Ryuuji’s eyes from below him, smiling thinly, as if to spit out, *you’re kidding, right?*

“Why would I need to do that?” she asked.

Until now, there’d been no phrase that encapsulated how plainly stubborn, tyrannical, intolerant, and conceited she was. *Why would I need to make dinner? Why would a pretty girl like Ami-chan need to do anything with potatoes? Why would Ami-chan, the rich model celebrity, help someone like you?*

Ryuuji was correct in understanding what Ami wanted to say and nodded once. “Then go take barley tea or something up to Kushieda,” he said.

“What~? But I was going to watch you cook...oof!”

When he quickly cut a piece of onion in half, Ami immediately looked away from his hands. The onion juice assaulted her right in the eyes and nose.

“...I-I got it! All I need to do is take barley tea to her, right! It’s like you’re trying to drive me out. I don’t like this...” Her eyes were going immediately, horribly red as she let out a trickle of curses and left the kitchen with a glass in hand.

The only ones left in the kitchen were Ryuuji and Taiga.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

“...”

Taiga was still clinging to the wall and her shoulders heaving as she breathed in and out. Kitamura’s derriere must have been a big shock to her, and she still hadn’t gotten over the trauma of Ami’s BAMs! He automatically reached out, grabbing her arm to help her up.

“You’re not in a position to worry about others right now.” Taiga swatted his hand and unsteadily stood up along the wall. “I’m fine. If anything, I’ll take one horrible trauma and use it to suppress other ones. Ya-chan’s giant breasts, Ya-chan’s giant breasts, Ya-chan’s giant breasts... whoa...”

“Don’t use my mother as your trauma.”

Taiga gave her head a shake. She finally seemed to have regained her breath. She stared into Ryuuji’s eyes as he looked worriedly at her. “You slow dog,” she said.

Haaah. She sighed dramatically and continued, her words quick. “You really astonished me today. Why would you waste a chance to cook with Minorin? It was an opportunity to appeal to her with pretty much your only positive quality.”

“I couldn’t do anything about it, no matter what you say. It wasn’t my fault. It was Kitamura’s.”

“And you’re blaming someone else again! This is why dogs are on all fours! You don’t have a sense of urgency at all, do you?” Taiga pulled her hair away as a deep seeded sense of gloom clouded her face. She stared piteously at Ryuuji.

“Wh-what do you mean by sense of urgency?”

“Until now, nothing’s been going well at all on this trip. We’ve only scared her a little bit, and you got nowhere with your personal charm. You haven’t done any of the work to get closer to Minorin. It’s shocking.”

“Don’t say that. At the very least, we did scare her and that was a success. Remember, that thing—Dimhuahua the First?”

“But we don’t have squat for the next part of the plan. You didn’t think that was all we were going to do, did you?”

“Well, no, but—”

Taiga clicked her tongue coldly and shrugged. She interrupted him as though to say listening to Ryuuji’s vague response wasn’t worth her time. “Don’t just grumble,” she said. “I’ll help you, I’ll do anything to crush our future as dogs, but I can’t manipulate Minorin’s heart. You have to work for that. Quite frankly, I haven’t seen you do a lick of work so far.”

“...”

I don’t have anything to say to that. Ryuuji looked at the onion he had cut in half and forgotten. He fell into silence. *It really is true.*

“Ahh, what a depressing face. You just need to work as hard as you can from here on out. Put all your effort into recovering. I’ll back you up as much as I can. For now, this is all I can do...”

As Taiga grumbled to herself, she slowly opened the refrigerator. Then she brought Dimhuahua the First, the seaweed ghost, out from its hiding place into the light of day.

She pulled it out of its plastic bag and shook it to bring some of its volume back.

“We don’t have anything better than this, but it’s probably better than nothing at all.”

She tore out the long string that she had used to hang it from the attic. Next she put the seaweed on the end of a broom standing in a corner of the kitchen and said, “It’s done. The thrusting faux-spirit, Dimhuahua the Second.”

“That was easy. Hey.”

Taiga looked to the side of the kitchen, where a sliding glass door led onto the wood deck. It was probably used to take out the trash. Like a cat, she surveyed the area cautiously.

“If you leave from here, you can get to the deck outside the living room. If Minorin’s sitting on the sofa by the window, I’ll try to open the window quietly and somehow surprise her with this thing. You pretend like I’m still here.”

“Pretend? Hey wait, what am I supposed to...?”

“You can come up with that part, at least.” Taiga took off her slippers, footsteps soft as she tried to go quietly outside.

“Ack!”

Rattle rattle rattle! She dropped a bowl. They both froze, clinging to the wall as they held their breath, but it seemed no one had noticed. Taiga carefully picked up the bowl, and once again slipped through the sliding door and onto the wood deck.

So I need to pretend like Taiga is still here... should I do that like this?

“Right! That’s good form, Taiga! You’re more skilled than I expected!”

Chop chop chop chop chop chop. Ryuuji skillfully used the knife to chop the onion into splendidly thin pieces. He spoke in a loud voice as he worked, doing his best to make sure everyone could hear.

“Could you grab that bowl for me? Right! Thank you! Could you do the carrots next? Yeah, that’s good! Taiga, you really can do it!”

Starring in a one-person play of his own design felt very odd, but he had to do it right now. Face spasming, Ryuuji spoke even more loudly.

“Good, Taiga! Next...”

Then, it happened.

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah...!

A terrific shriek came from the living room. *Good.*

Ryuuji raised his eyes.

“I did it, I did it! It was such a success, it’s like it’s too good to be true!” Taiga sneaked back in through the kitchen door. She very carefully closed the window and shared a small, soundless high five with him.

“Minorin was all by herself when she was sitting on the sofa,” Taiga said. “So I hit her shoulder with this from the other side of the curtain!”

“Great!” Ryuuji gave her a thumbs-up and nodded with her.

Grabbing various knives and carrots, they pretended to be bewildered.

“What was that scream just now?!” Ryuuji asked.

“Minorin, are you okay?!” Taiga added.

They stomped into the living room. Minori had collapsed with her arms akimbo on the rug.

“Minori-chan, what happened?! Keep it together!”

“Kushieda, hold it together!”

Ami and a now-clothed Kitamura were fussing over Minori.

Minori looked harried and petrified. For some reason, she pointed at Kitamura. “I-I-I-It was here... Kitamura-kun’s vengeful spirit... Kitamura-kun’s doppelganger...!”

“Mine?! Why?!”

For some reason, the conversation had become about Kitamura’s vengeful spirit. Then Minori went limp and shivered, visible goosebumps covering her body. Her face was beyond pale. She flushed, pink as a blossom, as though incredibly excited.

“M-Minorin...” Taiga, the one who had committed the crime, fearfully approached her. Taiga was probably feeling the twinge of guilt like Ryuuji. She plopped down by Minori’s side.



“T-Taiga...is that you...?”

“Yeah.” She wiped the sweat from Minori’s forehead sorrowfully.

“Taiga...be careful...there’s some kind of nefarious intent haunting this mansion...uggh.”

“I-Is there?” Taiga’s eyes darted suspiciously. *Right, right, right.* That would be the case. Talking about nefarious intent with those responsible was incredibly awkward. Ryuuji couldn’t even bring himself to look Minori in the eye. His heart raced, stinging painfully.

“M-Minorin, is there anything we can do...?” he asked.

“Is...the curry done?”

“Even Ryuuji can’t make it in five minutes, Minorin...”

“Right...then...make it suuuuuper suuuuuuuuuuper spicy. Make it something that’ll wipe away all this fear. I’m counting on you...”

Her shaking hands brushed Taiga’s cheek softly. Minori suddenly lost her strength and closed her eyes.

Taiga nodded. “We’re doing it,” she muttered firmly. For Minori’s sake, it seemed Taiga was determined enough to forgo having a small pot for herself.

Ryuuji’s resolution was also firm. If he could calm his guilty conscience with hot curry, he would make it as spicy as he needed to.

Ryuuji turned into a kitchen demon.

“Wah! This is amazing!”

Peeking in, Ami was amazed by the way Ryuuji handled the frying pan, making the ingredients dance nimbly in the air. He flambéed the food with one of Ami’s father’s fruit dessert liquors and then put everything in a pot to make an easy, Takasu-style chutney.

“Is there anything I can do?” the chief of the nudist village, Kitamura, asked.

“Wash it like you’re praying to it! Pray to the rice!” He issued orders as Kitamura washed the rice. “Taiga. You understand, right?!”

He turned to Taiga, eyes as sharp as a sword. He wasn't trying to dispose of Taiga for not paying a loan—he was just very determined.

“Yeah.” Taiga nodded. “You don't have the prized Takasu spice collection right now, so you can only use this...” She held the red spice packet that came with the roux, which read “Hot Spice Booster (This is incredibly spicy. Only add a small amount at a time. There is a chance it may endanger your health.)” If Minori wished it, he had to do it. With that in mind, he cut open all the spice packets that had been included. For Taiga, who had yet to try anything more than mildly spiced, this was an adventure. No—it was reckless.

He melted the spices into the pot and let it boil for about fifteen minutes.

“We had this,” Ami said. “It's from last year, but maybe we can use it?” Without hesitating, she threw in curry powder and togarashi chili powder she found in a kitchen drawer.

Another fifteen minutes passed.

Then, making absolutely sure not to overboil it, he finished a simple curry that secretly followed a school lunch theme. It was rolling with potatoes, contained the archetypal onions, had carrots, and was filled with slightly charred pork.

“For example, the spiciness can be salty and sharp, wasabi can smolder, togarashi can burn your tongue and your throat. I think it'll be spicy in a whole lot of other ways. When I tried tonight's curry, I felt a spiciness that was so hot it went straight to my head. I made a simple meal for the villa while also fulfilling Kushieda's request.”

They each piled their plates with rice and curry and sat side by side at the dining table. They steadily watched Ryuuji's lips as he began his explanation. His lips were swelling—they were bulging.

If he'd gotten duck-lips just from tasting it, how much potential was hidden in the curry? The spicy smell wafted quickly to them at the quiet dining table as the waves echoed around them.

“And so, be careful as you eat,” he said. “I'm digging in!”

“Thanks for the food!” They said in unison, taking their spoons in hand and stuffing their mouths. For a second, the table was hushed.

“Hm? It’s not really that spicy?” said Minori.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s good, but it tastes normal,” said Ami.

“I got the part of the pork with fat...” said Taiga.

“Yeah, this is good! As expected of Takasu!” said the nudist.

It took them a good three seconds to go from, *What it’s not that spicy*, to voiceless screams.

“Ack...”

Their spoons froze as they went for a second bite.

“It...it’s spicy, spicy, spicy! It’s *suddenly spicy!*”

“I-It’s spiiiiiiicy! Water, water waaaateer!”

“It’s hot, it hurts, it’s spicy, gnyaah! I spilled my water!”

“Uh... *cough cough cough cough*, this, my throat...*cough!*”

As he looked at their contorted faces, Ryuuji focused quietly on Minori’s.

Minori said, “It’s spicy, spicy! Okay, it burns! I ate it! Okay, it’s getting spicy again!” She ate the curry bite after bite with gusto like a man. Then, she noticed Ryuuji’s gaze.

“T-Takasu-kun! You’re amazing!” she continued. “It’s super spicy and good! It’s ultra-spicy, the whole package! I’m in heaven! It’s even better than I expected! The scary things and gloomy things were just blown away!”

She gave him a thumbs-up.

The inside of Ryuuji’s mouth was burning like hell, but the bottom of his stomach was bubbling with so much happiness, he couldn’t help but be embarrassed.

“Well...you said you wanted it to be spicy so...” he said.

“What? And then you really made it this spicy because of that?! No way, I’m moved! I’ve gotta get seconds!”

Minori's face was red from the spiciness as she grinned. She showed Ryuuji her perfectly empty dish. *Waaah!* His heart was painfully full with happiness. *If something like this makes you that happy, then I'll make it everyday for your whole life.* Of course, he couldn't say that. Ryuuji wordlessly snatched Minori's plate and heaped it with seconds.

Chapter 4

They had finished their shockingly spicy curry dinner.

“Okay, now leave the dishes up to me!” Minori, the only one in high spirits, piled the empty plates and took them to the kitchen. The others were all slumped somewhere. After suffering from the attacking waves of spicy-but-good, and good-but-spicy curry, their lips and mouths prickled with pain. They hadn’t been able to go without seconds and were so full they couldn’t stand, lips swollen and exhausted.

Ryuuji couldn’t let Minori clean up all by herself. When he tried to stand in order to help her, Taiga pulled at the hem of his T-shirt.

“Hm? What?”

“I might have eaten too much spicy stuff in one sitting. I want stomach medicine...”

“Does your stomach hurt?”

“Sort of...” Taiga frowned. She rubbed her stomach as though even she didn’t know how she was feeling, and tilted her head.

“I didn’t bring any stomach medicine. Kawashima, do you have anything?”

“Huh, I don’t. I only brought stuff for headaches.”

Oh dear, what should we do? When he put his hand on Taiga’s forehead to check if she had a fever, Kitamura stood up.

“I brought some. I have pain reliever and digestive medication, so come to my room. You can read the instructions and choose which one is best.”

“...”

“What’s wrong?”

Taiga nibbled on the lace of her sleeve. Even though Kitamura was inviting her to his room, she acted like a restless cat predicting the weather, rubbing at her face and at the back of her ears.

This isn't the time to be shy. Ryuuji grabbed Taiga's elbow and forced her up. "There, go with him."

Ryuuji gave her slender back a push. Though Taiga seemed about to pitch forward from the force, she somehow got her legs moving and followed Kitamura out of the living room. Without realizing it, he was watching her rear in worry.

"Whoa!"

"You're all absentminded."

Ryuuji was late noticing Ami close beside him. By the time he had, she had already approached him without making a sound and had come around to face him. She leaned across the table.

"If you're that worried about that brat, you could go with them, too," she said, narrowing her large eyes maliciously. Her rosy lips smiled as though she had seen something interesting.

"What's wrong with me worrying about Taiga?" Ryuuji asked.

"Oh, that again?"

"I would worry about Kitamura or Kushieda or you in the same way if anyone said their stomach hurt."

"Ohh, is that so? Then, my tummy might just be hurting, too." *Sniffle.* Ami let her Chihuahua eyes go misty as she plopped down next to Ryuuji. "Just kidding."

She didn't even give him time to humor her. Ami's smile disappeared immediately. She stuck out her tongue slightly and shrugged.

What is it with her? Ryuuji just looked back at Ami, refusing to be at the mercy of her cool, beautiful features.

"You know what?"

"What~?"

Ami was probably well aware of Ryuuji's exasperation. She stuck her angelic smile back on and pouted, her eyes wide. Her eyes twinkled with stars. Her looks were miraculous, but secretly she was like a delinquent from the outskirts of town. She sat imposingly with her long leg crossed

over her knee. Her thighs were spread rudely, and she circled her ankles. It seemed she didn't intend to hide that at all.

Ahh. Ryuuji looked to the heavens. He felt pity for all of Ami-chan's fans but then unintentionally laughed.

"Seeing you kind of never gets boring," he said.

"Was that a compliment?"

"If you put it delicately..."

What a weird person, he thought.

At first glance, Ami was an unparalleled beauty, like a jewel. In reality, she was a dark-hearted, spiteful girl.

"If you put it delicately?" she said. "Huh? Am I...delicate? How am I delicate...?"

Ryuuji felt strangely fond of Ami's genuine expression as she tilted her head. Her expression was unexpected and surprisingly normal. It was kind of like he was realizing over again that even she was an ordinary sixteen or seventeen-year-old girl.

A girl who can seem different depending on what angle you view her from is kind of unusual, Ryuuji thought. It wasn't like he disliked that about her.

"What? Why are you staring at me?" Ami asked. "Oh dear, were you just captivated by me? Nooo, that's okay, that's fine, you can't help it because I'm so very cute..." *Yeah, yeah, I get it, I get that.* She nodded in understanding.

This is really getting to her head, he thought.

Then, suddenly, a strange and childlike smile softly blossomed on Ami's smug face. "Right. Hey, hey, Takasu-kun, um, do you want to go to the beach right now?"

And then, it happened.

"Oops, there's still stuff left to clean."

They heard carefree footsteps. They were accompanied by Minori humming as she returned to the dining room from the kitchen. She didn't even scold Ami and Ryuuji, who had to have appeared to be talking without

offering to help. She was in a good mood as she piled the forgotten salad plate and glasses in her hands.

“Just take the glasses, it’s dangerous.” Ryuuji took the plate from beside her.

“Oh, you’re going to help me?” she asked. “It’s okay Takasu-kun, you were the head honcho for the cooking, so I’ll do the cleaning.”

“It’s fine, I’ll help.”

He carried the plate in one hand and made it a point of giving the table a good wipe with a dishcloth. He turned to try and get Ami to help with something, too.

“I’m not good with kitchen work,” Ami whispered. “I’m going to get out of your way.” She smiled thinly, already on her feet. She left before they had time to say anything, and Ryuuji was tongue-tied at the quickness of her exit. *Do you really hate helping that much?* He was lucky to be able to clean up alone with Minori, though. Just then, he felt grateful for Ami’s queenly disposition.

“Is that okay?” Minori asked. “Weren’t you in the middle of talking with Ami-chan?”

Even though Minori was saying it, he waved his hand, “It’s fine, it’s fine.” Then the two of them headed to the kitchen.

Minori had cleaned the kitchen perfectly. Even the pots and knives were properly tidied to Ryuuji’s standards. On top of that, Minori stole the plate from Ryuuji’s hands as he looked around the kitchen in enchantment. *Oh, but I was...* Before he had the time to object, Minori said, “Okay, the dishes are done!”

The splendid show was over in the blink of an eye. Of course, her dishwashing was so good he had no complaints, and she quickly lined up the dishes in the dish rack.

“What...? You have amazing technique,” he said.

“Hee hee, you think so? My part-time job is merciless when it comes to doing all the cleaning. I’m always wanting to get it done quicker, so I’d run around doing it, and I got better and better at it.”

With that, he discovered another of Minori's good qualities. Her smile was charmingly shy and embarrassed when she received a compliment, but she still puffed her chest in pride. She really was gentle and straightforward. He wanted to be like her. His heart longed for that pureness without pretense. If he was like Minori, regardless of his life circumstances, regardless of his face, he wouldn't sulk or torture himself like he did now at all. He'd have grown up straight as bamboo. *That's right.* If everyone in the world was like Minori, there would be no sadness or conflict. If everyone could smile like this, they would be happy.

Not noticing Ryuuji's glare, Minori continued to squint as she smiled. *That's right.* She raised her head and said, "Takasu-kun, I've got something good for you." Opening the freezer, she stuck her head inside. *Here.* She pulled out two small pre-packaged ice creams. They were the same kind everyone had eaten after dinner.

"There were just two extras left over," she said. "I was thinking we could have a sumo contest and have a bloody battle to steal them from each other, but... hee hee, it's a secret. Let's eat 'em together. Do you want vanilla or matcha?"

"Ma...matcha."

"Okay." Minori tossed one of the packages to Ryuuji with a grin. Then she glanced around. "If Taiga catches us, we'll be in trouble. She's a glutton. Takasu-kun, you'd better eat the whole thing in one bite."

Ryuuji prepared himself to take a bite from the ice cream. He ripped open the package and peeled it off. *Wait, wait, no way, no way.* He stopped himself.

"We can go onto the deck that way," he said. "Let's sneak outside and eat them."

He indicated the sliding door Taiga had jumped out of earlier with Dimhuahua the Second. *Whoa.* Minori's eyes widened, and he signaled her to be quiet with a, "Shhh." They moved quietly as they opened the door. Still in their slippers, they went out onto the sandy, rough wood deck.

For a moment, a strong sea breeze seemed to try to push them back inside, and they closed their eyes. A full curtain of night had fallen over the heavens above the sea. Only the stars and moon lit the lapping waves a

bluish white. The sound of the waves was boisterous in the hushed and chilly night.

“Be careful where you step.”

“Right.”

They softened their footsteps as they walked out to where the deck pushed out towards the ocean opposite the living room. Finally, the two of them swung their feet over the side to sit facing the sea.

Minori was so intent on looking at the ocean that she’d forgotten to take the wrapper off her ice cream. “It’s kind of...pitch-black. Is that the moon’s reflection?”

She pointed to the coast where the piercing moonlight reflected on the ocean surface. It looked as though a road of white light stretched along it. Suddenly, Ryuuji noticed that one of the glowing stars was moving slowly, but he didn’t say, *It’s a UFO*. He knew it was an artificial satellite.

As though he feared the silence, Ryuuji restlessly moved his fingers to peel away his wrapper. “It... it’s pretty.”

Chomp. He took a bite. Of course, he couldn’t tell what the flavor was like. The two of them had somehow hidden themselves away at a good time. Minori’s hair waved in the sea breeze, and the bright moonlight lit the outline of her profile.

“...Takasu-kun.”

His shoulders jolted. He had become enthralled with the sight of Minori in the night, so he couldn’t peel his gaze away. It was as though he had latched onto her.

“Is the matcha good?”

“...Yeah.”

“What did you eat earlier?”

“...Adzuki.”

“Which one is better?”

“...Matcha.”

He ate a second bite desperately, then a third. He had gotten this far on willpower alone, but he didn't know what to do now. This was probably his "chance." But, what was it a chance for? What were people supposed to talk about at a time like this?

"U-Um, K-Kushieda, you um..."

"Yeah?"

"D-do you have a boyfriend or anything?"

He did it. He said it. He regretted it instantly. He'd been too impatient. He'd gone too far.

Minori didn't say anything. She was silent, as though she hadn't heard him, and that silence was more terrifying than anything else.

Kushieda Minori, I'm begging you, do or say something weird. Hurry up and change the mood. Pretend I didn't just ask that. Don't say nothing at all.

If it stayed this way for another second, he thought he might drop dead.

"Hey, Takasu-kun. Do you think the seaweed ghost from earlier is still around here?"

"Huh... what?"

"Heeey. Seaweed ghooost. Where'd you come from?"

"Ack."

Ryuuji accidentally spat out his ice cream but held himself back. He'd asked that stupid question, after all. *Good, this is good. Erase what I said with your usual weirdness...* He looked back at Minori's face, and his heart stopped momentarily. He couldn't breathe.

"Takasu-kun, have you ever seen a ghost?" Minori looked intently into his eyes. The strangeness of her words bore no resemblance to the seriousness in her unblinking eyes, but her gaze looked unusually fragile and soft.

"What? No, I haven't, though..."

"Well, I believe ghosts exist."

He nodded.

“But...” she raised her voice as she continued. “I’ve never actually seen one before and there are those mediums, right? Those people who have seen them supposedly exist, right? I actually don’t believe those people at all. It’s not like you can see a ghost, and it’s not like someone could speak to them. I think they’re all frauds trying to get rich off of it.”

He couldn’t grasp the purpose of their conversation. Ryuuji automatically looked at Minori’s profile. Minori turned her gaze to the dark ocean as though trying to find something, though Ryuuji didn’t know what.

Her breathing quieted. “There’s another thing I feel the same way about. I believe that I’ll find someone I love with all my heart and I’ll date them and marry them and live happily ever after. In actuality though, it hasn’t happened yet.”

Minori’s toes hung over the ocean, swaying in the corner of Ryuuji’s vision as though she was trying to trace the white light.

“There are people in the world who are always falling in love and dating and being broken up with and breaking up with someone from the time they’re in junior high or high school,” she continued. “To them, it’s like love is commonplace. They say love exists. To me, those people are a world away. There are a lot of them, aren’t there? The so-called ‘supernaturally sensitive’ people who have the ‘sight.’ They’re the types who say, *Oh, I feel something heavy on my shoulders, I feel the spirits gathering over there, and look, there, too*, and that kind of stuff. That’s how I think of them, anyway. Are they really seeing ghosts? I’m skeptical.

“I feel like that with them, too. Like, are they really in love? I think that about them because I can’t see it. In my world, no matter how much I believe in it, it will never appear, even if other people think it’s obvious it exists. I haven’t encountered it before. It’s obvious to other people, but it hasn’t happened to me. So I can’t believe it. I’m outside the net. I want to believe, but I’ve also given up a little. Pretty much all I can do is envy the ‘people who can see’ and yearn jealously, and cheer them on from the sidelines. I guess that’s the only common ground we have. I haven’t given up to the point where I’m shouting, *It’s all a lie! It’s a trick of the eyes! You’re imagining it!* So, my answer to your earlier question is ‘no.’”

She said it all at once. As if she was uncertain whether he understood or not, she looked at Ryuuji's face again. "Takasu-kun, do you see ghosts?"

She slowly licked her lips.

In order to keep his voice from breaking, in order to keep himself from getting flustered and shaking, Ryuuji carefully squeezed out his words. "What I think is that...I haven't seen one, but I believe they exist..."

"So you're the same as me?"

He shook his head.

"I want to see one," he said. "I want to see one, so I actively go to spirit spots and look into the shadows at night. You just passively believe, right? That's different. You're scared, too, aren't you? And you also must think that there can't really be ghosts, right? Because you feel their presence even if you don't see them, so you're scared, right?"

Minori fell unusually silent and continued to stare steadily at Ryuuji. Ryuuji finally realized why he had desperately and vehemently said that. He didn't want Minori to say that someone she loved would never appear. Her saying that would have felt like a death sentence. He wanted his love to be mutual at some point.

Now, even without Minori saying it, it was like she was fully admitting she wasn't in love with him. It wasn't like it didn't hurt to hear that. But, rather than want to cry from the pain, he wanted to bet on the possibility of becoming someone to her in the future.

He couldn't help but wonder why someone who was so cute, who spoke so easily to guys, who was obviously a normal girl, would think like that.

"...I think that even for people who are sensitive to spirits, witnessing one probably isn't normal to them, either," he said.

"Huh?"

"Aren't there people who have seen ghosts and been really surprised? Maybe they saw one and couldn't actually believe it. Wouldn't there be people who erase it from their minds? There are probably people who see one once, lose sight of it, and worry it was a mirage. And there are also probably people like you, who think they definitely won't see one at first,

but end up seeing one unexpectedly. There might be people who change their beliefs. How do I put this... you don't know if that's normal for everyone else. I think there are people who want to see one so much, they work at it until they finally do. So I think you don't need to decide you'll never see one in your lifetime right now. You don't need to believe that it's all a lie, either. I think that, how do I say this, but..."

Minori continued looking at Ryuuji with wide eyes, holding her breath. He didn't know what she was thinking, but Ryuuji felt that she was waiting for what he would say next.

"...I think it would be nice if you saw a ghost someday," he finally managed. "I hope you'll want to see one. It might be mean to say this, since you get scared easily, but I think that there is a ghost in this world that wants you to see it...or something."

He had no regrets about what he said.

"So, look," he continued. "A lot of strange things happened today, right? There's a ghost somewhere, and it's saying, *I'm trying to get your attention, please look, I'm right here, find me.*"

Actually, it's me. Of course, he didn't go as far as to say that though.

"Huh."

After a moment, Minori suddenly shut her mouth, stopping herself from saying anything more. She looked up at the night sky as though bewildered by something.

"Why did you tell me all of that?" she asked.

You're my ghost, Ryuuji whispered in his heart and averted his eyes from Minori's profile. In her pitch-dark eyes fixed on the night sky, he felt like his very existence was being melted away. It was terrifying.

Minori sighed beside him, and he felt her smile as she responded, "So, I thought it was weird how there were ghosts trying to spook me this whole day. And I couldn't even see them, right? So then, just now, I saw something. A UFO—an artificial satellite that looked a lot like a UFO. I thought it was a UFO, but it really wasn't. In the end I still didn't see one. I felt like one was really close, but... So then I kind of felt like I wanted to talk about that kind of stuff with you, Takasu-kun."

“You’re so weird...” he answered, but Ryuuji had also seen it—that exactly-like-a-UFO heavenly body that glowed and slipped through the night sky. Then he knew what had actually spooked Minori. It was his own love.

Unlike a ghost or UFO, it wasn’t an unsolved mystery. He existed right beside Minori. If she wanted to look, she should have been able to see him.

Ryuuji thought about that as the wind blew over Minori and him, their eyes on the tumultuous, black ocean. If Minori had seen him, that was enough to make him happy. Even if she saw him and cast him aside because she wasn’t interested, it was much better than not being noticed at all.

“Ryuuji...”

It happened right after he had finished his business in the bathroom, washed his hands, and quietly opened the door.

“Hm? Taiga?”

It was one in the morning.

Maybe it was because they had woken up so early or because of the excitement, but everyone had gone to bed early. The night was silent. The small face that popped out from one of the doors was lit up by the bathroom’s dim light.

“What’s wrong? You couldn’t sleep?” Ryuuji lowered his voice and closed the door to the bathroom quietly so he wouldn’t wake anyone.

Like a cat, Taiga stole out of her room and pattered out without her slippers, still in her bare feet. She approached him through the hallway. “Those footsteps sounded like you.”

“...You’re really becoming less and less human.”

Her long hair was braided for sleep. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her lightweight summer pajamas, which were her favorite even at home. Taiga nodded. Though she was acting like a child, it didn’t seem like she was sleepy; her large feline eyes were wide open.

Ryuuji, possibly because he had gotten up to go to the bathroom, felt kind of awake, too. “Do you want to go down?”

When he pointed at the stairs, Taiga said, “Let’s go.”

“I was thinking we need to plan for tomorrow.”

“Yeah, right...we can’t keep depending on Dimhuahua the First and the Second.”

As they exchanged whispers, they went down the stairs without making a sound. They turned at the hallway and went into the dim living room, turning on the small table lamp as they sat on the sofa.

The faint sound of waves reverberated in the quiet, and the soft lamplight lit only the table so they could barely see the outlines of each other’s faces. Ryuuji tried to turn the lamp toward them to get a bit more light.

“Whoa...these kinds of lamps are pretty expensive...”

He noticed the fine workmanship. It was made of pale peach-colored ground glass with fine purple designs. The gentle light blurred in a calculated way as it went through the glass, so the lamp bathed everything in warmth like a candle flame. It was an art nouveau design with a scene of dragonflies fluttering among the flowers in a forest. It wasn’t a super famous gem like a Lalique or a Gallé, but it was still an object he wouldn’t normally come across.

But as he looked at it enthralled, a rude finger slowly entered Ryuuji’s line of sight.

“That’s kind of gross.”

“You...”

Prod prod prod. Taiga artlessly picked at the delicate dragonfly carvings. It wasn’t simply that their interests didn’t align. Faced with someone who couldn’t understand elegance, art nouveau might have been the same as art guano.

I can’t stand her...

As he looked intently at her pretty, elf-like features, it happened.

“Do you want to eat the leftover curry?”

There it was. *Heat it up, heat it up*, he knew she'd start saying.
Haah. Ryuuji sighed.

"Let's not. It's one in the morning," he said. "You'll upset your stomach again. Actually, are you feeling better now?"

"I'm fine. My stomach was kind of feeling weird from before dinner. I didn't get seconds, so I didn't get enough to eat."

"You didn't have seconds. I didn't notice. That's unusual. You must have really been feeling under the weather."

"Yeah. When I got medicine from Kitamura-kun, he stayed until I took it, and was like, 'Do you have enough water?' 'Did you take two like you're supposed to?' 'Is it working?' And I got nervous, and it hurt even worse. It finally stopped hurting after I just got a little sleep and woke up."

"About that stomachache..."

"Anyway, where were you while I was taking the medicine? I couldn't find you anywhere."

Actually, I was with Kushieda, and... He found it hard to tell her that. For some reason, though he didn't understand why, his throat tightened. *Uh...* He looked at the outline of Taiga's peach-like cheeks, lit by the dim light. Ryuuji somehow, he actually, somehow...

"I was cleaning my room."

...lied.

Taiga's long eyelashes fluttered in the dim lamplight. Her round eyes lit up as they turned abruptly to the darkness of the window as though she were no longer interested.

"Hmmm."

"I'll go heat the curry."

Before Taiga somehow saw him, he quickly stood up from the sofa.

The living room, softly illuminated by the art nouveau lamp, was now filled with the smell of curry.

"Ahh, I ate it all..."

“Why did I have to eat, too...?”

By the time he noticed, there were two empty plates in front of them. It was terrifying. The delicate flavor of the curry, which had been left to rest, had become even deeper.

He took the plates to the kitchen, quickly washed them, and came back with glasses of barley tea.

“Hey... don’t sleep there.”

The Stuffed Tiger was lazing on the sofa. Wriggling her bare toes, she opened her large mouth and yawned.

“Huagh... I’m not going to fall asleep,” she said. “Didn’t I say we would talk about tomorrow’s plan? Actually, I was just feeling a little... nervous...and got tired. And we’ve only been here for a day.”

“You still seem like you’re super sleepy...”

This was a three-part combo: Taiga would be full, lie down, and be in a deep sleep before he even realized it. After witnessing Taiga’s transformation into a cow several times, Ryuuji couldn’t possibly believe, “I’m not going to fall asleep.” That said, by the time the combo kicked into effect, he would generally be on the tatami mats and drooling, too. When he saw Taiga’s happy, idiotic face as she slept, his body also seemed to relax. He thought it was almost as though her body broadcasted a sleepy aura that invited sleep.

“If you sleep here, what do you think Kawashima would say...”

“Dimhuahua?”

“Mmhmm...”

“...”

Ryuuji sat on the floor, leaning against the sofa Taiga was stretched out on. He put his head against it. A part of his forehead touched the side of Taiga’s stomach. As he was in that pose, his forehead warmed, and an absentminded film formed over his vision...and naturally...

“...Aren’t I falling asleep?”

Ryuuji jolted himself awake. *I can’t, if I stay like this, I really will fall asleep.*

“Taiga, don’t lie down. Sit upright.”

“...”

“Hey.”

He stuck his hand behind her head and forced her body into an upright, ninety-degree angle. Taiga went limp and tried to curl up in a ball.

“It’s cold... it’s kind of cold...”

“Ahhh, that’s embarrassing! Ah, stop!”

To wake Taiga up, Ryuuji knelt on the sofa. Like a cat, she rolled around and curled herself up. She had tried to stick her head in between his knees, and his thighs.

“Ugh.”

Suddenly she woke up, amazed. Her narrowed eyes opened.

“That was your crotch!”

“You were the one trying to get in there!”

She turned her head and glared at Ryuuji. He kind of wished he could knock that head of hers down.

“Seriously...I’m wide awake now. I want to peel the skin off my face, disinfect it, and put it back on.”

Though she said she was awake, she yawned again. Finally, Taiga sat down properly on the sofa next to Ryuuji. Just when he was wondering what she would say, she continued, “Anyway, there’s one thing we’ve learned from this. Trips are exhausting.”

“Why are you saying that now?”

Taiga raised her arms defenselessly, stretching them as she looked to the ceiling. “It’s kind of always tense or something. I thought I’d be happy being with Kitamura-kun from morning all the way to night, but I’m more nervous than happy.”

“Well, that’s understandable, especially after suddenly seeing him naked.”

“It’s the same for you, isn’t it?” she asked. “Minorin wasn’t naked, but aren’t you tired?”

“Well...”

He couldn't tell Taiga. It had only been him and Minori during that quiet time, but it wasn't like it hadn't exhausted him. His heart had beat like a drum. Just a single day of this trip had probably aged him several years.

“I always dreamed marriage would be really great,” he said. “But, in reality, it must be difficult. You have to be with the person you like *all the time*. If this keeps going, I might die young.”

Taiga undid her braids. They danced in the darkness as she played with the ends of her hair, combing through it several times with her hand, pale even in shadow. She quietly added, “So that's why Mama and Papa got divorced.” She was so open in that moment that she exposed a wound that still had to hurt.

Suddenly she looked at Ryuuji, who had nothing to say and could only listen. Taiga snorted slightly.

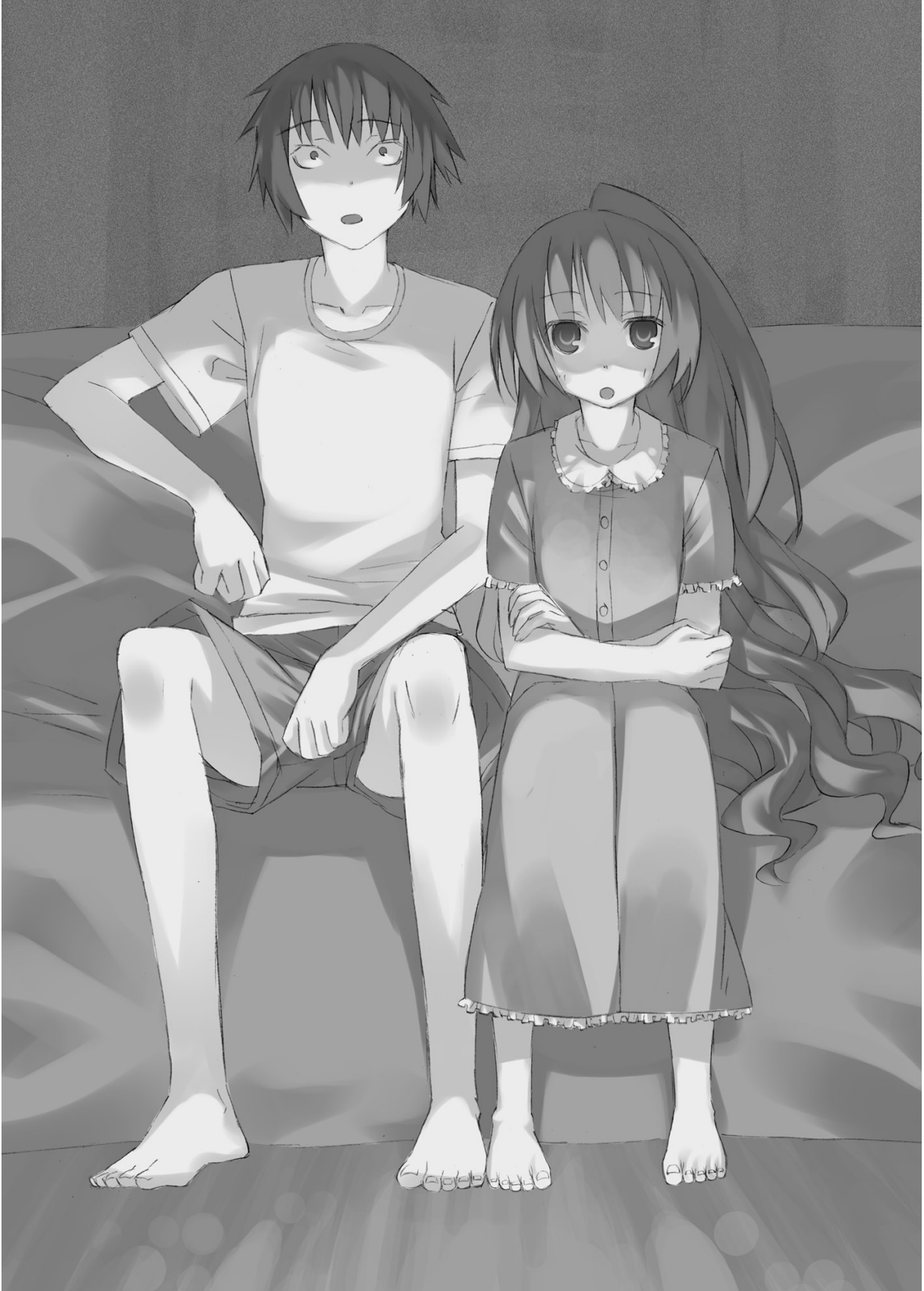
“But I can be with you and be completely fine,” she said. “It's like your tiny two-bedroom apartment is rubbing off on me.”

“That's rude. What do you mean?”

“Look how stupid we look. We're in this huge room, but we're still all cramped up in a six-tatami-mat space.”

“Oh. I see. It does feel like that,” Ryuuji automatically agreed. It was true. It wasn't like there was only one sofa, and if they wanted to talk there was a table, but they were plopped down and talking like this, stuck together so closely they couldn't even stretch out their legs. He hadn't even noticed that the ankles of their bare legs were practically on each other.

Taiga didn't seem particularly upset and wasn't telling him *move or get away*. It was in the middle of the night and this was a good distance to talk to each other in quiet voices, anyway. It wasn't like Ryuuji wanted to move away, either.



“It’s nice being near someone you like,” Ryuuji said. “This really is too much though. I couldn’t stand it every day.”

“Yeah... achoo!” Taiga’s upper body jolted with the small sneeze. She reached out and grabbed a tissue. Still in that position, she blew her nose.

By the time he noticed it, they were ten centimeters away from each other. Their feet were on top of each other, and only the sound of the waves echoed in the dead of night. Normally, when a teenage guy and girl were like this, it would become something more.

“Once more. I didn’t blow it all out.”

“Right, that’s a lot.”

“My nose is irritated.”

He looked at the elegant curve Taiga’s profile would have traced if she wasn’t blowing her nose. *Bffft!* Ryuuji’s heart was strangely calm, like he could finally catch his breath after returning home from a boisterous and unusual world. Taiga was a beautiful girl, but she was also the rare Palmtop Tiger. Her territory should have been the last place you’d want to “catch your breath.”

“Ngahhh...maybe these are allergies...”

“Did you bring antihistamines?”

“I didn’t. Ugh, I don’t want my nose to be snotty in front of Kitamura-kun...”

As she exchanged distracted words with him, Ryuuji yawned reflexively. *Hwaagh*. He covered his open mouth with his palm, lost in thought.

Being with Taiga in a celebrity villa wasn’t much different than being with her in the second floor of a rental. It seemed like the atmosphere was always the same. It seemed like Inko-chan’s birdcage should be right there and Yasuko should be lolloping home. Any minute now, her sweet voice would slur, “Ah’m home,” her high heels clacking as she staggered in drunkenly. That was what life was like when he was with Taiga.

It was a strange feeling, but he didn’t dislike it. If anything, it gave him peace of mind, like a talisman, even though Taiga’s ferocity was

actually uncontrollable.

Taiga, the focus of his thoughts, rubbed her eyes sleepily. “Hey, Ryuuji. I thought about this, but...that other time, that dream? It was unexpectedly...” she whispered, her voice more childlike than usual.

“Hm? You mean the prophetic dream?”

When he turned his face to her, Taiga suddenly clamped her mouth shut. Then she averted her eyes as though slightly hesitant.

“Actually, never mind,” she said. “More importantly, what should we do tomorrow? If we use Dimhuahua again, we’ll be stuck in the same pattern.”

He wanted to know where the conversation would have headed, but it wasn’t like they couldn’t plan for the next day. Ryuuji once again righted himself and thought about the approach they’d use.

“Okay. We said we wanted to play in the ocean tomorrow, right?”

“The ocean is bright and in the open, so there’s no place to hide. That’s too bad.”

“Right. What should we do...?”

“Something that would scare Minorin...”

Hmmm. As they both tilted their heads at the same angle, it happened.

“Why do you want to scare Kushieda?” came a sudden voice from the dark.

The two of them practically jumped, speechless as they fell off the sofa and rolled onto the rug, folding themselves under the sofa in an effort to hide.

“Hey, what is it?”

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

Someone grabbed Ryuuji’s shoulder and pulled him up, peeling him away. The bespectacled face looking at him was the nudist, Kitamura. He couldn’t run anymore.

“You two,” Kitamura said. “I came down because I was thirsty, and this is what I find. What were you plotting...? I smell curry.”

“W-we’re not plotting...”

“More precisely, was it because of your crimes Kushieda was so upset?” he asked.

The “precisely” left Ryuuji and Taiga both at a loss for words. All they could do was look at each other awkwardly and uncomfortably, faces stiff. They couldn’t come up with an excuse. Of course, their behavior was the equivalent of them confessing, “Yes, we did it.”

“Really now...” Kitamura pushed up his glasses and sighed as though exasperated. “Why in the world would you do that? Don’t you feel sorry for Kushieda?” As the class representative, sternness crept into Kitamura’s voice.

Feeling like he was being scolded, Ryuuji automatically folded his legs under himself as he sat on the sofa, holding his knees with his hands as he searched for the words to continue.

“Th-that...was a present for Minorin.” Taiga, who was sitting similarly beside him, tried a desperate excuse.

“A present?”

“Yeah. Even though Minorin acts scared, she loves horror more than having three meals a day. I’m saying this as her closest friend, so I can’t be wrong. She said she loves being shocked that way. She loves getting scared. So, I wanted to help her make summer memories by surprising her...”

What kind of guy would believe that? The moment after Ryuuji thought that though, Kitamura exclaimed, “Oh!”

Apparently, there was one guy who would.

Kitamura planted his fist into his hand with a plop, his glasses glinting in the darkness. “I see, so that’s what that was,” he said. “Just as planned, Kushieda was scared. Her eyes had a weird gleam to them, like she wanted more.”

That was probably Kitamura’s imagination, but Ryuuji was thankful he thought so. He and Taiga nodded yes vigorously and prayed in their

hearts that Kitamura would forget what he had seen, said, and heard. Hopefully, he would disappear.

“Well then, I got it,” he said. “In that case, let me join you.”

No! Ryuuji futilely thought.

“We’ll all work together and give her the most authentic scare we can tomorrow.”

Ryuuji and Taiga exchanged looks. *What do we do? What should we do?* But they couldn’t do anything. Kitamura was already determined. They didn’t know what he was thinking.

“Right, let’s call Ami,” he said.

“What?!”

“Dimhuahua, too?!”

“Yeah. No matter what you say, she knows all about this place, and also, look, Ami must also like doing this kind of stuff. And, if we left only her out, she’d sulk. I’m going to go get her.”

They didn’t have time to think of a reason to stop him before Kitamura skipped up the stairs to call Ami. Once he was out of sight, they suddenly huddled together.

“Wh-what should we do, Taiga?! We’re getting further and further away from the original plan!”

“We can’t do anything! Now we can only keep going.”

“Keep going...”

We all scared her, we scared Minori, Ryuuji arrived on the scene as a knight, it was all everyone’s doing, after being scared Minori was angry, because Takasu and Aisaka... What drastic steps could they take to keep themselves from flowing in that direction? Minori would just hate them for scaring her and lying about it. Would Ami obediently go along with the plan? It was Ami, after all. She would think it was funny and might try to use the chance to annoy Taiga. She would probably spill all the beans, anyway.

Taiga licked her lips, and, as though she had already decided on something, concentrated in the darkness.

“We can’t do anything about it,” she said. “Since it’s come to this, we have to remake the plan. For now, you protect Minorin. Then after everything becomes clear, you say: ‘I tried to tell them to stop. I was worried, so I protected you.’”

“B-but... you think that’s okay?! You think that’ll *work*?!”

“All we can do is try! What else can we do?! You don’t want the dog future to come true, right?”

In the darkness, Taiga’s eyes glinted. Before Ryuuji could nod...

“I’m sleepy!” Ami’s irritated voice and two sets of footsteps quickly approached the living room.

“Aren’t you id...iots? Don’t you have anything better to do? I’m sleepy, seriously...really.” She continued after Kitamura pulled her downstairs. A far cry from her cute girl mask, her sleepiness and bad mood ominously festooned her already black-hearted true nature.

“Well, well, you don’t have to say that.”

“Don’t touch me, shuddup!”

Her childhood friend patted her back to placate her, and she pierced him with a cold look. Taiga nestled up to Ami and plopped down.

“Hey, Dimhuahua.”

“Huhh?”

“If you help us, you can have your favorite Ryuuji as your plaything for three days and three nights.”

Taiga clasped Ryuuji’s face in her hands and pulled him in front of Ami’s eyes. Ryuuji, flustered, looked at her critically as if to say, “Why are you trying to get her to join in?”

“If she’s not with us, she’ll tell Minorin everything,” Taiga quickly whispered to him, and he choked back his words. That might have been true.

“See, Dimhuahua, you can even have the naked version.”

“Whoa.”

Taiga boldly rolled up Ryuuji's T-shirt all the way up and showed Ami his sexy black nipples.

"Don't want it." Ami, averted her eyes and bent backwards. Ryuuji fell off the sofa.

This sexless turn of events kind of hurt his feelings. Taiga, though, wasn't discouraged at all.

"No, no, no, I want Dimhuahua in, too, I want to do it together! Hey, hey, let's do it together!"

"Ah, ah, ah, ah..."

Like a cat, Taiga rubbed her head against Ami's stomach as Ami sat cross-legged on the sofa. Ami swayed as Taiga clung to her like a kid trying to gain affection. Ami's eyes were half-closed as though she were still sleepy. She tried to push Taiga off with a weak hand, still bothered by the swaying. Taiga raised her eyes and threatened in a low voice, "One hundred and fifty impersonations..."

"Wha...?" *Pop.* Ami's eyes finally opened fully.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey! You'll be crucified... Let's do it, let's do it! I'll stream it on the internet... Why not, why not! It'll never disappear, it's eternal?!"

Ami had to have woken up now. She grabbed Taiga's face and peeled her off. "Really, seriously! I got it! I got it, okay! I get motion sickness easily, so stop..."

Furiously scratching her head, she glared at Taiga, Kitamura, and Ryuuji. "Why do I have to be involved with...scaring Minori-chan so she'll have fun? Ahh, really, you're a nuisance... Yuusaku, get something to write with really quick."

With paper and a ballpoint pen in hand, Ami started drawing something like a map. "This is the villa we're in right now. This is the inlet at the back of the beach we saw, right?"

"What hideous handwriting..."

At Taiga's mutter, Ami gave her an irritated stare and then resumed.

“Here, there’s a steep rock wall and there’s a cave you can go inside. Two or three people could walk through side by side easily. It’s pretty wide, but it doesn’t get any sunlight and the seawater runs through it so there’s only a small scaffold for you to walk on. If you bring a flashlight, it’ll be like a test of courage, so if you surprise her there, she’ll be pretty scared, right?”

Ohh... A small round of applause erupted in the dim living room.

“As expected of Ami. You’re a local after all.”

“There’s no one who can compare to Kawashima when it comes to plotting.”

“I’m not a *local*. And I feel like you just insulted me...” As Ami glared at the troop of boys, Taiga clung to her shoulders.

“You did good!” Taiga said. “You can come to my house and do it with my pet parakeet!”

“That’s my house you’re talking about and my pet...”

“What do you mean by *it*, Aisaka?”

“Oh, that ugly balding parakeet? I don’t want to really do anything to it...”

Ami contorted her face as though bothered, but just for a moment, she focused intently on Ryuuji. With eyes that appeared to be thinking of something completely different from her noisy friends, Ami looked like a regular girl who didn’t know what was going on.

Almost an hour after they planned the test of courage in the cave, Ami and Kitamura each went to their rooms. But as for Ryuuji and Taiga...

“You can go to the restroom by yourself, at least...”

“But it’s dark.”

Taiga forced him to go to the bathroom with her, so they went upstairs a little later than the others. They parted ways in front of Ryuuji’s

room, and Ryuuji returned to his dark bedroom by himself.

“Well then, guess I’ll go to bed...”

As to be expected, sleepiness washed over him intermittently like the sound of the waves. He turned over the towel blanket, which had lost all of its previous warmth, and slipped inside, when...

“Ack! What is this?!”

He forgot to lower his voice and jumped up. He had innocently touched his pillow and felt something entangling his hand. It was thin, long, thread-like...and kind of slimy?

He turned on the light, his eyes adjusting to the brightness after having acclimated to the dark.

“Uh...”

He automatically froze at the eeriness of it.

There were several long hairs clinging to the towel covering the pillow. It wasn’t completely covered in hair, but it did look like a girl had been sleeping on it, although there were too many strands for that to have been the case. When he brought up his hand and pulled the transparent strands off, they were sticky. The visceral disgust he felt made him want to throw up. He leaped out of bed and scrubbed his hand with a tissue.

Obviously, it wasn’t the same length as Ryuuji’s hair. He also didn’t think it had been there when he originally gotten up—but wait, when he had gotten up, he hadn’t turned on the light.

In that case, when could this have happened?

Of course, nobody was there to answer his question. Ryuuji felt unsettled, like something was licking his back. He gulped. The sound of the waves was outside the window... the sound of the wind...

No, it wasn’t a big deal. Something like this wasn’t a big deal at all. The hair had definitely been there from the start. He had accidentally brought a towel Yasuko had used. It was Yasuko’s hair. The stickiness... was his own drool or something. If it wasn’t, then he didn’t have any other explanation for it.

After recomposing himself, Ryuuji backed out of the room. Maybe it was Taiga's hair. He didn't know how, but Taiga might have done something to cause this. *I don't really care*, he told himself over again, his feet moving fast, almost running. He headed to Taiga's room. He didn't even knock as he opened the door.

"T-Taiga, did you do something to my room...huh?"

"Ryuuji..."

The light was on and shining brightly. Taiga wasn't in bed; she was standing stick straight.

"Hey, what do you think...this is?" She hid behind Ryuuji's back and pointed to one of her dresses, which had been thrown on the ground without being folded.

"Aren't those the clothes you threw off? I always tell you to hang them up properly."

"No. I didn't wear that one. I was thinking of wearing it tomorrow and left it folded in my bag..."

"M-maybe you made a mistake?"

"I thought that, too, but when I went to pick it up...it was warm. It was like someone just took it off...and also...that..."

Taiga's fingers squeezed the hem of Ryuuji's shirt. His heart seized up. Ryuuji couldn't move. Wet, splattered footprints were around the discarded dress. It wasn't fresh water but a viscous liquid in the shape of a foot.

"Th-ther- there was something strange about my room, too," he said. "It was like someone had been sleeping in my bed. That sticky stuff was on my pillow, too..."

"..."

The room fell into silence. Only the low sound of the breaking waves repeated like a broken record.

"Eep!"

Suddenly, the window shook.

It's the wind, he thought, but Taiga collapsed onto the ground. Ryuuji didn't lend her a hand; he was suddenly about as useful as a wooden doll.

He felt it—a presence. Like a cat, Taiga turned to look at spots where there was nothing to be seen. She stood against the wall, desperately.

“N-no...wait... hey, this is weird. L-Let's go to someone else's room...”

Taiga pulled Ryuuji's arm. When she tried to leave through the still open door into the hallway, *Bam!* The door was pushed shut from the outside.

“...!”

Taiga turned around. Ryuuji fell, unable to stand. They crawled to each other and huddled together against the wall.

“Th-th-th-th-this is a dream?! Right, it's a dream, right, Ryuuji?!”

“Right, it's a dream. We had dog kids and live in a doghouse, we're still in that dream!”

“If we keep our eyes closed, we'll eventually wake up!”

“We'll wake up, we will!”

They closed their eyes as if their lives depended on it. Whenever they opened them, they felt like something strange was happening and couldn't stop from shaking.

Chapter 5

“...**I**’m so tired...”

“...Mmhmm...”

The morning sun pierced the kitchen. A small and large shadow faced each other gloomily as they looked at the bag of bread on the table.

Ryuuji thought of making sandwiches. For brunch. He had even asked them to buy ham and lettuce the day before.

But his hands remained motionless. Ryuuji let his sleep-deprived eyes, which were three times more sinisterly bloodshot than usual, wander. Taiga just sat on a chair. Her hair unbrushed and her face unwashed, she had barely gotten herself dressed. She looked absentmindedly out the window.

They were sleep-deprived. They were very, very sleep-deprived.

In the end, they couldn’t stay in the room the previous night. They had gone back downstairs, jumping and grabbing

each other’s hands at the slightest noise. They switched on the lights, turned on the TV, and while telling each other, “We’re not sleeping tonight!” “Let’s make this an all-nighter! Staying up one night can’t hurt!” they watched the news until six in the morning.

Ryuuji remembered proposing a walk on the beach to Taiga. He remembered Taiga nodding and saying it was a good idea. But before he knew it, they were face-down on the table and half-asleep. He had woken up when his hand went numb from resting his cheek on it. He shook Taiga, who was next to him in the same position, awake. It was seven in the morning.

The glittering morning beach unfolded refreshingly on the other side of the window. Not a single cloud was in the clear sky. The quiet slosh of recurrent waves was comforting as it washed over their ears that morning. It probably would have been the ideal time to walk along the sandy dunes with a golden retriever. However, no such elegant creature existed here, and

instead there were only a sleep-deprived mutt and a tiger looking at each other with idiotic, dumbfounded expressions.

Ryuuji roughly rubbed at his eyes. He called to Taiga in a quivering voice, like somebody's grandpa. "I really am tired... maybe I'll leave breakfast for later, go back to my room, and try going back to sleep in my bed..."

Nuagh. Taiga, whose voice had also gone quite geriatric, raised her head. "Nooo... if we do that, I think we probably won't wake up until past noon..."

"Right... you're right..."

Ryuuji turned his head. The stiff muscles in his shoulders made a cracking sound unsuitable for a seventeen-year-old boy. It might have been because he had been sleeping in a strange position, but the muscles in his body were so tense they hurt. Though it was a super short time, sleep was still sleep, and even feeble with fatigue, his memories were restructuring themselves in his head.

The stuff that happened last night had to be some silly misunderstanding—they had probably just gotten confused. They shouldn't have been so frightened—they should have just slept soundly in their beds.

He was sure he had accidentally brought an unwashed towel with him that had Yasuko or Taiga's hair on it, and Taiga must have taken her clothes out as she ransacked her bag before taking a bath and just forgotten. Something like that had probably happened. The stickiness was his drool... and Taiga's foot sweat.

Ahhh. He stretched broadly, Ryuuji forced some energy into himself and stood up.

"Okay," he said. "Let's make the sandwiches. Let's use some of the leftover curry to make curry potage."

"Potage? That sounds good..."

Like that, they energized themselves. Ryuuji unsealed the bread bag Taiga was looking at. Then he stared at the bread...with merciless eyes. He wasn't a pervert fetishizing bread—his eyes were just really dry... wait, what was he doing?

“What am I doing? I shouldn’t be staring down the bread. I need to prep the ingredients.”

Most of his mind was definitely still wandering.

“What’re you putting into it?” Taiga asked.

“Right. I need to boil eggs and cut them and mix them with mayo. We have canned tuna, right? And lettuce and tomato and ham. You help with something. What will you do?”

“I’ll cheer you on from right here.”

Why, you...

As he was glaring at Taiga’s white cheeks with his bloodshot eyes, he heard the sound of light footsteps coming from down the hall. *Patter, patter.*

Minori appeared. “Hm? Huh? You’re already awake! Good mornin’, Taiga!” She was bathed in pure white light. Her bangs were pulled back with a turban headband as though she had just washed her face. Her smooth forehead was on full display, and she smelled like face wash foam as she pushed up Taiga’s nose like a pig’s.

“Oh dear, Takasu-kun!” Minori said. “You’ve already started making breakfast? You made everything yesterday, too. I was thinking of making breakfast today, so I got up early, but I’m already late!” Pretty much still in her pajamas, she wore a T-shirt and shorts, and her smile was on full blast first thing in the morning. “Aww, the weather’s nice!”

Instead of greeting him, she turned to Ryuuji and sprung into a standing side split. “Y-yo.”

It took all of Ryuuji’s strength just to hold up the bag of bread in that moment. Minori’s glaringly bright presence first thing in the morning was too much.

“Huh? You two don’t look too good. Did you not sleep?” she asked.

“A-ahh...a little, but not really...”

“We watched TV the whole night...”

“What? Why’d you do that again?! Are you okay? Do you feel okay?”

Taiga shook her head in response. Then she clung to Minori.

I want to be fawned on, too. Ryuuji only watched Taiga's behavior jealously.

There, there, there! Minori rubbed at Taiga's back and patted the small of Taiga's back affectionately. She lifted her head up as though she realized something. "Why don't you two take turns showering? It'll probably refresh you a bit. Plus it looks like Ami-chan and Kitamura-kun are still sleeping."

"What?" Taiga knitted her brows as though annoyed, but then she froze suddenly. She turned and looked at Ryuuji for a moment with mysteriously quiet eyes.

"Actually, maybe I will shower," Taiga said. "Minorin, will you give me that towel?"

"This? This is a face towel? And I've used it."

"It's fine. You help Ryuuji in my place."

"Is it okay with you if Taiga goes first, Takasu-kun?"

Uh, I...

Taiga interrupted Ryuuji's bewilderment with a snort. "There'll be hair and grease left over if I take one after Ryuuji, I don't want that!" She cut him down with a single stroke.

Like I'll let you treat me like a stray dog that hasn't been bathed in half a year. But, of course, she didn't seem willing to accept any ifs, ands, or buts, and swiped Minori's towel from her neck, then pitter-pattered out of the kitchen. Ryuuji stared at her back. She wasn't the type to take an invigorating morning shower.

"Then I, Kushieda, shall help in Taiga's place."

Right. It clicked. Taiga had been thinking of him. He and Minori would have time alone together. He couldn't be so critical when she sometimes came through like this.

"Uhh, what do you want to do? What should we make? What are you doing right now?"

Her eyes were like crescent moons as Minori peeked at Ryuuji's hands. The moment she did that, a sweet smell wafted from her hair to the

tip of Ryuuji's nose, and his hands shook. *Ahh ahhh.*

"W-well then..." he said. "I'm going to make the boiled eggs, so Kushieda, could you slice the onion into thin pieces?"

"Roger that. What are you putting it in?"

"In the sandwich."

"Oh, 'dwiches, that sounds good!"

Minori, not seeming to notice Ryuuji's nervousness at all, began muttering, "Imma not that great at English though." (She was imitating their classmate in 2-C, Doi-kun, whose nickname was Doitchi.) *Splish splish.* She quickly washed her hands, grabbed an onion, and used a knife to chop off the roots and head. She peeled its skin and quickly threw it in the trash. Then she started humming as she sliced.

"You're pretty good at that..." Ryuuji was accidentally back to where he started. As he watched Minori rhythmically use the knife, he felt like it was the first time he'd seen someone his own age doing kitchen work well. The onion slices that fluttered off the knife were uniform and so thin they were transparent. Her skills were comparable to Ryuuji's godly technique.

"Huh? Did you just praise me? Yay, I did it!"

"This is as good as your cleaning yesterday. Is this also because of your part-time jobs?"

"I've never been too bad at cooking. My parents both work, and I've got a hungry little brother."

"A little brother? That's the first I've heard of him..."

"He's a strapping high school baseball player. Mwa ha ha! Look, the onion is like sheer lingerie!"

Without letting her eyes leave the knife, Minori grinned and laughed. As she laughed, tears ran down her face.

"Oh, it stings...my eyes, my eyes~!" Her sniffing nose was becoming red. Everything about her was cute.

"Right...I've gotta soak the lettuce in water..."

Ryuuji couldn't look right at her. He was already embarrassingly happy that Minori was standing beside him and working with him. Even if

it wasn't obvious, Ryuuji shied away as he carefully tore the lettuce into pieces. He rinsed it, and to avoid wasting water, made sure to collect it in a clean wash bucket. He also threw some ice into it. Finally, he even wiped down the sink drain with one hand. He used his remaining hand to adjust the boiling eggs' heat.

"But, Takasu-kun, you really are good at cooking," Minori said. "I already knew because Taiga told me, but it's impressive. Yesterday's curry was the best. Even how quickly you tear the lettuce is on a different level. There aren't many high school boys who would say they need to soak the lettuce in the first place. I admire that."

"Y-you think so? It's not that big of a deal..."

If you wanted, I'd like to show you my technique for cutting decorations from cucumber, carrots, and radishes, though... Ryuuji could make a phoenix out of vegetables.

"Mmhhh, it's amazing. I think that the way you do things so neatly is beautiful, Takasu-kun. Ha ha, the other kids in the class don't know about this part of you, do they, Takasu-kun? It's just Taiga and me and Ami-chan. What would you call this? It kind of feels special."

Stop it! His heart wanted to shout, but Ryuuji just shrugged. She had gone a little too far with the praise. It was as though this girl wanted to torture him to death.

"The girl you marry will be so happy."

That was the cincher.

As he popped open a can of tuna and watched the heat on the boiling eggs, all Ryuuji said was, "What do you mean?" However, in his heart, he was already dead. "Kyu...Kyushiedaaa?"

"What is it?! Takasu-kyun!"

His voice had cracked. *What was that?* Embarrassment hit Ryuuji a moment too late, and he lost his composure further. Because of that, against his better judgment, he said, "A-about yesterday!"

What was he doing? He himself didn't even know what he was trying to say. Of course, he couldn't continue after that. Flustered, Ryuuji closed

his mouth. *What should I do, what do I do, this silence is scaring me... what do I do?*

As Ryuuji became more unsettled, Minori threw the sheer onions in next to the lettuce to soak them together in the water beside him.

“Takasu-kun, about that...” she continued for him. She looked at Ryuuji’s face, her irises wide, and put her pointer finger up to her lips. Then, she lowered her voice. *Shhh*. “Don’t tell anyone about that. No one else knows. That’s a little... well, how would I put this...it was careless. A slip of the tongue.”

Her eyes softened with a smile. “It was a slip of the tongue, but I’m glad I talked with you about it. Thanks for listening.”

“Kushieda...”

Without thinking, he met her gaze head on and, in that moment, he could clearly see something more than a smile in Minori’s gaze. Suddenly time seemed to stop.

“Oh, waaah! The eggs!”

Bshah! The pot overflowed. The hot water boiled over and smothered the stove’s fire. The two of them hurried and turned off the switch, checking for the smell of gas.

“Do you think...it’s okay?”

“Yeah, probably.”

He wiped down the trivet with a dishcloth. He hadn’t realized it, but they were standing close to each other. *Uwah*. Flustered, Ryuuji immediately stepped back in an attempt to distance himself.

“You’re such a klutz, Takyasu-kun. What a cutie,” she suddenly said as she bewitched him with an open smile.

“Aaaaaah...” Ryuuji was at a loss for words. He didn’t want to let her see his face; it was on fire. He felt like she was making fun of him, so he bopped Minori’s shoulder.

“Ow.”

It was the first time he’d bopped the girl he liked. Minori laughed, “Hee hee hee,” and wriggled her waist.

“Now we just do everything according to plan.”

After saying that, Kitamura, who was in nothing but his swimsuit with a towel over his shoulder, quickly walked ahead of them, gaining distance. Ryuuji and Taiga nodded slightly to each other. They held bags in each of their hands. At first glance, it looked like they were carrying the stuff for the beach—the sandwiches, drinks, towels, etc. But the truth was that at the bottom of the transparent bags, they had hidden flashlights and Ami’s homemade map, as well as all kinds of other secret tools.

“Oh, wait, wait.” As they were in the living room of the villa, lit by the gentle morning light, Minori came in late in her terry cloth parka, flip flops with flowers on the straps, and shimmery shorts. The moment she passed Ryuuji and Taiga, her ponytail bounced up and down. Her sunscreen, drifting to Ryuuji’s nose, smelled sweet.

Ryuuji wore a T-shirt that he didn’t mind getting wet and swim trunks. Actually, the reason he wore a T-shirt was because he didn’t want to be compared to Kitamura. Taiga had on a fluttery white and green gingham dress on top of her faux boob swimsuit. *Sure the shoulders are straps and you’re showing off your back, but don’t you think you’re wearing too much?* he thought. *Guess I’m not any better. She probably doesn’t want to be seen next to Ami in a swimsuit.*

“Huh? Where’s Kawashima?”

“Ahmin was still putting sunscreen on upstairs. I asked her to come, but she told me to go ahead first.”

“But she said she’d bring a parasol with her. She can’t carry that on her own. I’ll go check on her.”

Ryuuji had Minori and Taiga go ahead as he dashed up the stairs by himself. They were going to the beach, which was right below the wood deck anyway, so he didn’t have any qualms about being left behind.

He looked around to grab the parasol so he could bring it ahead of Ami, but he couldn’t find anything that looked like it. He knocked at the

door to Ami's room, guessing that it was in there.

"Hey, I'll take your parasol over. Where is it?" he called.

"It's in here, so come and grab it." Ami called from inside.

What a lazy person. He turned the knob and stepped inside.

"The parasol's over there."

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"I got distracted."

He'd discovered a sinister narcissist—or idiot—standing in front of a full-length mirror in her swimsuit. She laughed contentedly as she gathered her hair up and then let it fall down. He kept his distance so he wouldn't have to interact with her and slowly approached the parasol.

"What do you think of this swimsuit?"

Ami, the narcissist, suddenly turned around and posed for Ryuuji. The denim bikini set off her white skin nicely, and of course, her well-proportioned figure was remarkably displayed.

"It's fine?"

"Huh? That's it?"

What more was he supposed to say? Ryuuji was thinking a lot more than just "fine." He thought the S-shaped line between her chest and her butt was charming, that the muscles of her white stomach were as beautiful as a marble statue of a goddess. If she were on the cover of a pinup magazine, like the ones in the bookstores nowadays, she would probably instantly become the most popular idol. She was pretty, and he admired her beauty, but if he said all of that, any normal person would accuse him of sexual harassment.

"Hmm, I made my bikini debut in swim class. Maybe this isn't fresh enough for you...?" Ami made a puzzled expression and tilted her head. "But, this part comes off."

"Whoa!"

Schwip. She undid the large ribbon that went around her neck and acted as a strap for the top of her bikini. Fearful the top would come off, he screamed.

As though making a fool out of him, Ami's bust bounced.

"Do you think this way is better?" she asked.

The bikini had become a tube top, exposing even more. The milky valley of her bust was distinct, and as she bent to look in the mirror, the soft curving swell seemed like it could spill out at any second.

"Keep it on! Keep it on!" Ryuuji yelled, practically afraid of her.

"Why?"

"No reason!"

"Then...tie it back up for me ♥."

"No!"

He said it vehemently and jumped suddenly at the parasol. *I'll take this and get outta here fast, being alone with her is dangerous.* Regardless of how well he knew that the angelic smile and moist Chihuahua eyes were fake, danger was danger. *Someone, anyone, please put a "danger" sign on this girl's back.*

"Really, Takasu-kun, you're too cold."

Ami pursed her lips, manufactured a pout, and turned away. For a moment, her glance pierced him, like it hid some terrible maliciousness she wanted to test him with.

"...Even though you're nice some of the time."

Ryuuji simply turned on her. *Right, I'm nice. That's because I'm a good person.*

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks. Don't just wallow in your own narcissism. Hurry up and get ready. I'm going ahead of you."

"What? What was that?"

If you don't like what I said, then I'll show you what you're acting like.

"Hmm, へ hmm," Ryuuji slowly sang. Like Ami had been doing earlier, he posed in front of the mirror, pulling his short hair up and letting it fall down, and staring at his own face as he turned. Goosebumps covered him at the sight of his own reflection, but this was what Ami had been

doing. Just for good measure he said, “Hey, Kawashima, how’s this swimsuit? Does it look good on me?”

He rolled up his T-shirt and showed her his boring, 4,980 yen swimsuit. Ami raised her eyebrows quickly. Her mouth twitched in utter disgust, her angelic features shifted, and she showed him a hint of her true face.

“How was that?” he asked. “You hate it, right? Isn’t it a pain? That’s how you are.”

“Takasu-kun, don’t you think the Palmtop Tiger’s rubbed off on you?”

“You can take this part off.”

“Don’t take it off!”

He put his hand on his front button, which he of course had no intention of undoing.

Ami stopped him by practically pushing him away. Her light eyes stared at him. “If that’s your attitude,” she said, her lips drawn up sarcastically. “I won’t help you today.”

She hit him where it hurt. She meant the plan to scare Minori, of course.

Ryuuji turned to Ami, flustered, “D-don’t say that!”

“Whoa. Your attitude changed pretty quick.”

He choked on his words.

Seeing that look, Ami changed course, put her angelic mask back on and grinned, composed.

“Well, I’ll ask you right now. Takasu-kun, why are you trying so hard to make this fun for Minori-chan?”

“Uhhh...”

“Is there a reason you can’t tell me?” She blinked her large, misty eyes, stepping into Ryuuji’s space. She wouldn’t let him get away until he answered, and if he ran, she would come after him and corner him no matter where he fled. She probably knew his answer. It was possible. She

knew and yet she wanted to hear it come from Ryuuji's mouth. It was definitely possible that she wanted to tease him.

"Hey. Hey. I said *hey*. If you don't tell me, I won't help. You have ten seconds. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four... see, are you sure about this? Threeee, twoooo, oooone... hey, are you sure~?"

"..."

He bit his lip. He wouldn't say it. He didn't want to say it. He couldn't tell his heart's secrets to a girl as volatile as Ami. He didn't want to joke about his feelings for Minori. He didn't want to talk about them because he had been threatened. His didn't have much of a backbone, but he refused to become someone without one at all.

Ami's eyes narrowed. She looked at Ryuuji closely. "...Zero. I'm not helping." She let go of him suddenly, and Ryuuji was free. Flipping her hair, she turned on her heel, leaving Ryuuji behind as she walked straight out of the room. He went after her, carrying the parasol, but Ami didn't turn around.

The midsummer sun pierced their eyes. The heat was terribly choking.

Ryuuji laid down a picnic blanket in the sand that seemed to burn his skin as soon as he touched it and then put up the parasol.

"Yahooooooooooooooooo!" The first thing Minori did was throw off her sandals and dash to the blue ocean. As she kicked the sand, she threw off her parka somewhere nearby and ran to the shoreline where the white crests glittered with spray.

"Here I go!"

What an amazing cartwheel. "Whoa!" As Ryuuji raised his voice, Minori took an energetic step and jumped amazingly high right before his eyes. When she landed, she fell down into the water, sitting and enveloped by the waves.

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha! It's stinging my eyes!" *Pwah!* She brought her face out of the water and rubbed at her eyes like a child. "Come on, hurry

up!” Minori waved a hand at Taiga. She was exactly like a summery goddess.

Under the parka she had taken off, Minori was wearing a striped bikini! Her skin, which shed water droplets because of her sunscreen, was dazzling as it reflected the light. Minori was practically glittering in the blue ocean. Under the blazing, midsummer sun, she waved her hands broadly so that her chest, which seemed to have a good amount of heft to it in her sporty style bra (he didn’t know if it was okay to call it that), bounced cheerfully. Ryuuji took it all in visually. The stomach she was so worried about was covered by her shorts, but it was actually magnificently taut and her bellybutton was a pretty, vertical line.

On the other hand, Taiga, who sat next to Ryuuji on the picnic blanket, groaned and furrowed her brows as the goddess called her. She balled up her body gloomily under her long dress and hid herself in the shadow of the parasol. She even hid her face behind her long hair.

What a difference.

“What’s wrong?” Ryuuji asked. “Does your stomach hurt again? Look, Kushieda’s calling you.”

“Ugh, but, but...” She rubbed her own flat chest anxiously over the dress. “I was thinking...the pads might come out in the waves...”

Ryuuji grabbed her hand and nodded heavily. “Stop that, it’s indecent. That’s okay now. I considered what went wrong last time and took out the hooks so they’re sewed right into the lining.”

“B-but it’s not just that. I can’t swim.”

“That’s fine, too. We all know that. No one’s going to ask you to do synchronized swimming.”

“It’s the first time I’ll ever go into the ocean for real...”

“That’s also... is that true?”

Taiga wriggled and then crumpled the hem of her dress. She nodded as she played with her bare toes and hid under the parasol. She wanted to go, but she was scared of the ocean. She wanted to go, but she was embarrassed of being in a swimsuit. Her whole body emitted hesitation.

Guess it can't be helped, Ryuuji pushed her until she was out of the shade. "It'll be fine no matter what, so go," he said. "This is your first time swimming in the ocean, after all. Here, put on some sunscreen."

"Uhh...what if I drown?"

"Kushieda will save you."

"Aren't the waves scary?"

"You're definitely stronger than any wave."

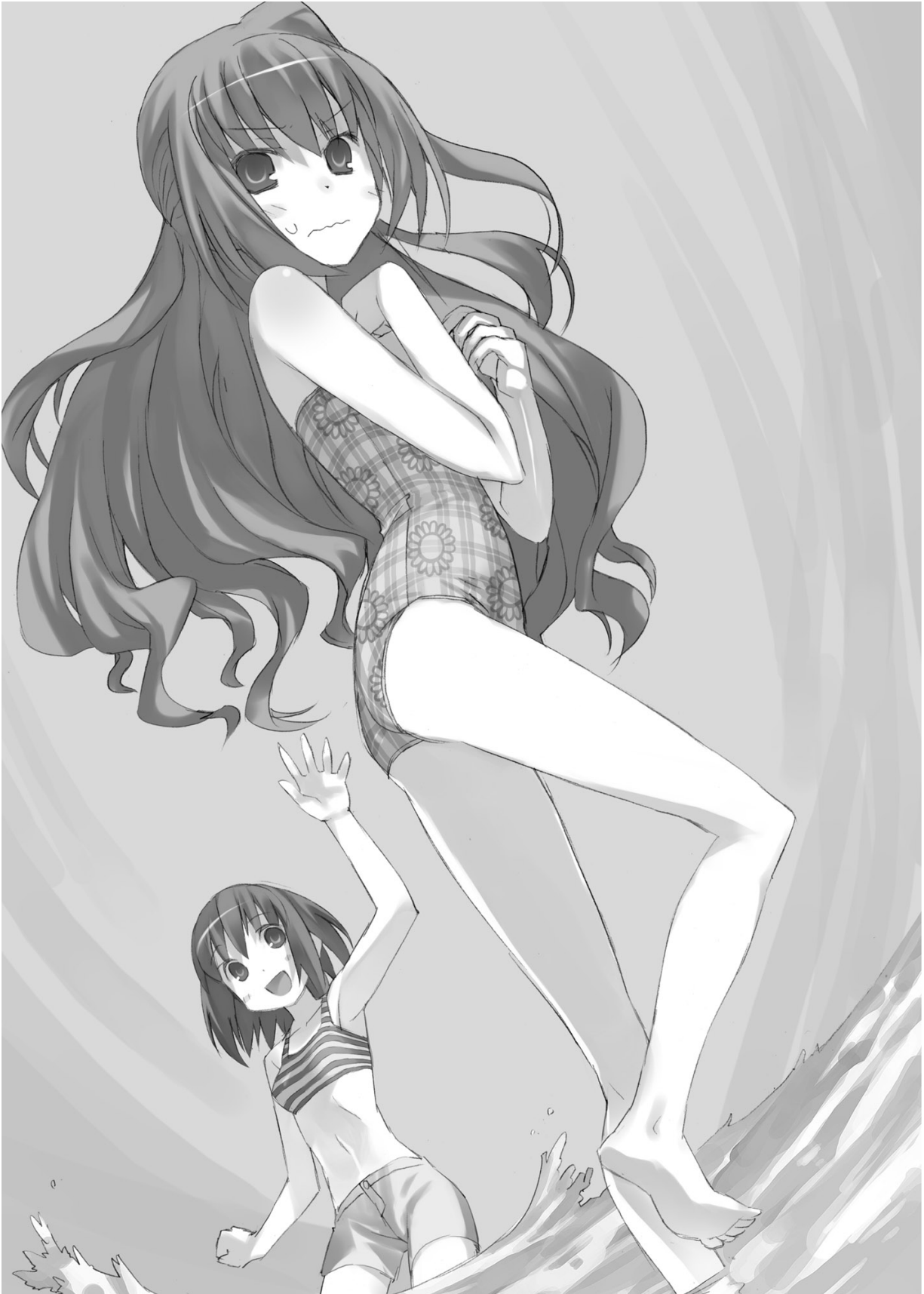
As she hesitated and wriggled timidly, Taiga raised both her hands up as though doing a banzai cheer. He pulled up her dress. *Schwip*. Off it came. In the shade of the parasol, her white skin and slim body seemed like it might melt. She wore a single piece swimsuit with red flowers scattered on it. The day before yesterday, they had gone on the hunt for it. Despite hysterics, despite making a commotion and hemming and hawing for three hours in the station shops, they finally bought an xs size swimsuit. It set off the color of her clear skin. Even from Ryuuji's perspective, he thought it looked pretty good on her.

He handed her the sunscreen and had her put it on every nook and cranny of her whole body. *Look there's some left over, make sure to get your neck, look, you haven't put it on your back, okay, once you're done, go*, he nagged her.

Taiga hesitantly looked for Kitamura and checked that he wasn't looking in her direction (*What's taking you so long?*) as she put her hair up in an easy, messy bun. She ran to the shoreline toward Minori.

"It's cold!"

Like someone who carelessly tried to get into a too-hot bath, she pulled her foot away as the waves washed over it. She stared at the quietly approaching crest as though she had a grudge against it. Taiga really was a member of the feline family, so water might have been against her nature. Though tigers at least knew how to swim.



Kitamura was slightly further off, arguing with Ami about something. Their words were lost beneath the sound of the waves, but occasionally Ryuuji could make them out.

“According to the plan, you and I are supposed to...”

“What~? But that’s kind of laaame.”

“But what will I do without you? I don’t know what it looks like in there.”

“Can’t you use the map I made you? This is such a pain.”

According to their plan, Taiga and Ryuuji were supposed to keep Minori busy while Kitamura and Ami went to the cave and set up several traps to scare her. But Ami, obviously, was in a “Lame,” “Shut up,” “I don’t feel like it” mood. She didn’t even seem concerned about acting like a good girl in front of Kitamura.

“I’m going to take a nap. Sorry, Yuusaku, good luck doing it on your own. I’ll pass. I’m not concerning myself with this.” Ami ended the conversation and came back under the parasol. She lay down on her side next to Ryuuji, who was on the sheet.

“Oh, did you hear? You don’t have any complaints because this was your choice, right, Takasu-kun~?” Her smile was charming, but she was clearly looking down on him as she whispered, “If you’d really like, I could ask you the question again? Just kidding. I lied. I wasn’t actually that interested to begin with.”

“...”

Shall I fart on you?

Actually, that wasn’t something he could do on command. Ryuuji ignored Ami and stood up, and he approached Kitamura, who was at a loss.

“We can’t do anything about her. Let’s go together.”

“Seriously, I can’t believe Ami... it’s okay, Takasu, you stay here. We could have tricked Minori by saying something happened to the electricity or something at the villa, and that Ami couldn’t fix it by herself, but it’ll seem suspicious if it’s the two of us. I’ll go on my own.”

“Will you be okay?”

“I’ve prepared the traps themselves. Piece of cake, so...hey! Kushieda! Aisaka!”

“What?” Minori answered from the waves in a carefree voice as she pulled on a terrified Taiga’s arm, making her walk into the ocean.

“I’m off to poooooooo!” Kitamura yelled in a bold, guttural voice. Minori fell right over into the ocean. *Waugh*. Taiga also lost balance and sank.

Are you fine with this? Ryuuji pretty much gasped, but it seemed Kitamura was indeed fine with that.

“Well, Takasu, I’m leaving the rest up to you.”

Fwip. Kitamura saluted and stealthily took the secret tools as he walked over to the villa. He was only pretending to go back and slipped around the side toward the inlet.

“Ah-eee, my mouth is salty... wait, what was going on with Kitamura-kun?! What’s he trying to show off coming out naked and announcing he’s going to the bathroom?”

“I’m tired...”

Coming by as Kitamura was leaving and sopping wet, Minori and Taiga held each other’s hands. Taiga had just only gotten into the ocean.

“You *just* went in, how are you tired?”

“After being exhausted and turning five cartwheels in the sand, anyone would be tired.”

The feline eyes she sharply turned to him were bloodshot and creased. She glared at Ryuuji with a fiery gaze.

Right, that’s true... Ryuuji fell silent. In front of him, Minori and Taiga gulped down the bottled tea they had brought.

Then Minori jabbed at Ami’s shoulder. “Ahmin, you play in the ocean, too! Or maybe you’re not feeling well? Are you tired?” Minori looked at Ami’s pale profile with concern.

“Hmmm, yeah... I’ll go later,” Ami said. She plastered a thin smile on her face as she gently refused Minori.

Taiga dribbled tea over her chin (she was in a swimsuit, so he let it pass) and stared at Ami. Then, though he didn't know what she was thinking, Taiga put a hand on Ami's white back and started shaking her.

"Dimhuahua, try swimming," Taiga said.

"What? What, no. I want to sleep." Of course, Ami immediately turned away and ignored Taiga. But, even that didn't deter Taiga.

"Why not? You can entertain me with your usual lewd behavior."

"You know what...fine. I don't care. It's worthless talking with you."

"Then try eating this." Taiga grabbed a sandwich with her still-wet hand and brought it up to Ami's mouth without hesitation. She pushed it against Ami's lips, even though she was being ignored.

"Really, what's with you?! You're so annoying! You just want me to eat this, right?" Ami got up and gloomily stole the sandwich from Taiga's small hand. She took a big bite from it.

"Oh. Ahmin, that's... the one I made for myself..." Minori said.

"Minori was eating them like they were delicious. I wondered what they were like."

"Ack ugh...guh..."

Ami writhed in agony. The cross section of the sandwich she let fall to the ground was violently mustard colored... no—it was *actual mustard*. She coughed violently and regained her breath by chugging down oolong tea, taking Ryuuji's arm as she gulped.

"T-Takasu-kun...could you...?" She hung her head, swayed as she stood, and firmly grabbed him. Then she gradually dragged Ryuuji to the shoreline.

"Wh-what do I have to do with this?! Don't take this out on others!"

"Shut up. Keep quiet. That spoiled, bratty tiger's sins... Are! Your! Sins!"

In a surprisingly vengeful attack, she kicked his butt. Ryuuji turned a somersault and fell into the ocean. The waves swept him away, and he rolled one, two, three times over the sand. His vision was white from the

foam. Though he couldn't tell up from down, he somehow groped for the sand and stood.

Ami's next target for revenge was Minori. "Minori-chan. Here's a really fun idea." She turned her demonic smile on Minori.

"Whaaat iiis iiit, Ahmin?"

"There's a really beautiful cave near the inlet. It's a very pretty place, so I was thinking everyone could go and explore it, and have a walk through it in the afternoon. Do you want to go?"

"Whoa, that sounds fun! Let's go! Let's go!"

Ami's grudges went bone-deep. In the end, she'd helped with the plan. She grabbed Taiga's arm. "Right, hey, hey, Aisaka-san, I'll show you some swimming. I'll show you how to swim."

"Th-That's fine. That's fine, it's fine, it's okay...I said it's okay! Hey, Dimhuahua, I won't let this go without a fight! No! I said nooo! Ryuuji, help me!" Taiga's face twitched as Ami pulled her toward the shoreline. The water splashed as they stepped.

Farewell, Taiga. He was only kidding. No matter where they went in the shallow beach, the water would only reach Taiga's bellybutton.

After they played in the ocean for a while, they returned to the villa. They took turns using the shower to wash their hair and change into fresh clothes. Then they took a break to eat the leftover sandwiches and potage, until finally, the sun was slanting at a nice angle.

If they went when it was still bright out, the atmosphere wouldn't be right, so they took their time getting ready.

"Whoa, is this it?! Is...this...it...?"

It was about a fifteen-minute walk from the villa.

"Yeah, this is it."

“...” Minori was at a loss for words as she looked between Ami, who turned to her with a thin smile, and the entrance to the cave.

The inlet was a rugged and rocky tract, and the craggy rock, which had been eroded by the waves into a cliff, continued straight up to the forest. The dark opening went into the bowels of the rock, its mouth stretched wide with unfortunately unapologetic creepiness.

The front of the cave was almost three meters tall and three meters wide and was so deep they couldn't figure out how far back it went. On top of that, the entrance was also marked with a large, lone wooden sign that said “Danger!” In actuality, it was just a sign Kitamura had put up himself.

Minori looked in, gingerly hugging herself with her supple arms. “I-It kind of doesn't seem like a walk. More like a test of courage? That's...what it seems like, right? Huh, it says ‘danger.’ Aha ha...ha ha... M-Maybe I'll wait here...” She nonchalantly tried to turn on her heel.

“Hey, hey, what's that now?” Kitamura clutched Minori's shoulders. Completely sunburned, he pulled and pushed Minori, laughing as he directed her to the cave entrance.

“Isn't it a pretty spot for a walk?” he asked. “We're making our last memories on this trip.”

“U-uhh...but it's kind of... I get scared easily, right? This is kind of...creepy...and it feels like something will jump out at us... I don't need a memory like this. So... sorry, let's stop, really. It says it's dangerous. It's dangerous, right?”

“I've been playing here since I was little. It's fine,” Ami said smoothly.

As though to pressure her even more, Kitamura added, “Kushieda, if you say something like that, something really will jump out at us.”

What will? Minori's mouth couldn't clearly form words.

Kitamura stared at Minori as her eyes twitched. “You have got to know that whole deal. Like how otherworldly things will appear when you're doing a séance. That's what happens when you tell a hundred ghost stories in a row, too.”

“That doesn’t seem like something you should tell someone who’s easily scared...”

“Right, so you just need to tell yourself you’re not scared at all. There really isn’t anything in there. This is a chance to observe nature with your own eyes, right? There might even be animals you’ve never seen before.”

“Riiight... it’s fine if it’s just animals...”

Ryuuji and Taiga distanced themselves a bit, sighing as they watched the exchange.

“Bringing Kitamura in on the plan might have been the right thing to do.”

“That fast talker. He’s so cool.”

You think so? Ryuuji tilted his head. He didn’t have any medicine or Kusatsu spring water to use on Taiga as she grinned, her eyes glittering. But, it was true that Minori seemed unable to reject Kitamura’s invitation and, though he felt bad for Minori, he needed to do everything in his power to scare her as much as he could. The only chance Ryuuji had left was to just protect Minori when she was frightened. It was different from their original plan, but since they had come this far, they could only go through with it.

“Okay, then let’s go, Kitamura exploration team! I’m red, Takasu is black, Kushieda is blue, Aisaka is pink, Ami is also black!”

I-I’m pink... Why am I black?! You’ve got to be skin-colored, then. Everyone say yea to ignore red.

“Does everyone have their flashlights?! Who wants to see a golden cobra?!”

Yeah! The team members ignored the second half of what he said. They turned on their slightly unreliable flashlights and lit the inside of the dark cave. It was wide enough that two adults could stagger around with their arms outstretched and walk abreast all the way to the end. In the very middle, there was a depression in the rock where seawater flowed like a river. It was wide and tall enough to seem safe to go in, but it was more than deep and dark enough to scare Minori.

“Start marching!”

“Uhh, it’s dark. Wait, Kitamura-kun.” Minori fearfully followed after Kitamura. Taiga and Ryuuji continued behind him.

“Hey, Kawashima. We’re going.”

“...”

Ami came last. She sighed laboriously and scratched her head as though the exploration was obviously lame.

The sound of their five pairs of sandals against the wet rock, and the sound of the small river of seawater echoed in the narrow but refreshing cold place.

“Uhh...it’s dark, it’s narrow, I’m scared...”

They hadn’t done anything, but Minori was already half-crying. She looked around, bent forward anxiously as she walked.

Soon they would reach the first hurdle Kitamura had described. Ryuuji let his sharp gaze dart left and right. As he did that, he firmly grasped the tie of Taiga’s dress. Taiga, who had previously made a big fuss (“Shuddup!” “Pervert!”), was about to fall down for the fourth time, and Ryuuji was holding her up. When he saved her again, even she held her tongue this time.

Taiga looked slightly meek as she turned back to Ryuuji once. It was coming soon—according to Kitamura, “The first trial...Airborne Attack.”

They had failed to ask what it would be, but according to Kitamura, he had set up a terrifying device using a prize-winning idea that operated on the laws of physics and the smallest amount of human power. After receiving such an extravagant explanation, even Ryuuji’s heart was thumping. What amazing thing would happen? Could he protect Minori from it?

Kitamura, who walked ahead, cast a nonchalant but meaningful look at Ryuuji, who followed behind. It looked like something was about to happen. Ryuuji tensed, nervous, as right before his eyes, Kitamura kicked something, undoing a thread hidden between some rocks so that Minori wouldn’t notice. Something flew at them, swinging like a pendulum on a string.

“I feel kind of creeped out...” It passed silently on Minori’s right silently as she turned to the left.

“Blech...” Next to Ryuuji, it licked Taiga’s face. And then, because it was a pendulum, it came back.

“Uh...” Ami bent backwards at the last moment and was safe.

“Whoa...” It splatted on the back of Ryuuji’s head and came to a rest.

What remained was a hanging piece of fried tofu, swaying to and fro as it pleased. Kitamura turned around, his face practically twitching.

“Wow! Oh, that scared me! What is this? A sea cucumber? Seriously!” There was one sea cucumber stuck to the rock wall.

After seeing that, Minori fell on her butt.

“My...my face...”

Taiga’s cheek had been done in by the tofu. It was smeared with oil that noticeably gleamed and glittered even in the dark. *This is terrible.* Ryuuji glared at Kitamura, but noticing Taiga’s state, he laughed despite himself. “Bah-ha!” He was unaware of the oil smearing the back of his own head. Naturally, he got a silent knee to the liver and dropped without a sound, but Minori didn’t notice that, either.

The first trial was a failure.

Right. Ryuuji realized the truth. Kitamura got good grades, but at his core, he was an unredeemable idiot. “That’s Maruo’s best trait. ♥” “Maruo-kun is cute. ♥” An illusion of the girls that were Kitamura’s ardent fans danced and fluttered about in the dark.

They continued through the twisting, turning cave for a while until finally Kitamura raised his voice. “Whoa!”

This was the signal for the second trial. After the mediocre nature of the first one, Ryuuji didn’t expect much, but according to Kitamura, the second trial had taken the most time and effort to set. This one was titled, “The Drowned.” Next to Ryuuji, the shiny-cheeked Tiger bent sharply forward, still expecting to be hit by one of Kitamura’s contraptions.

Minori turned, terrified. “What, what is it?! What’s wrong?! A sea cucumber?!”

“No, it’s not!” Kitamura grabbed Minori’s shoulders and pushed her forward.

Naturally, Minori was confused and planted her sandaled feet desperately. “No, no, hey, wait! Wait, wait!”

In spite of her objections, Kitamura mercilessly shone his flashlight on a slightly gloomy, distant rock. Then, in a loud voice, he said, “There, look! What in the world is that?!”

“Shut up,” Ami’s sober mutter echoed.

They dropped into silence.

“Hm? What? I don’t see it.”

Ahhh! Ryuuji and Taiga held their heads. *Why, why is it like this...? Ahh, make it stop.*

“W-well, look, can’t you kind of...see something over there?”

“Hmm~? I don’t see anything though. Maybe I should get glasses, too. Kitamura, what’s your prescription? Lately I haven’t really been able to see things that are really far away. At least, when I went to get my eyesight measured in the spring, I was a 0.5.”

“What?! That’s super nearsighted!”

“Really? Is it really? Whoa, no way. I haven’t had any trouble in class, so I was thinking I’d be okay as-is for a while.”

“But that’ll hurt you during matches. You should really think about getting glasses or contacts.”

Why are you talking about eyesight? No longer able to press it, Ryuuji scratched his oily head. It didn’t really matter, but he had neatly pocketed the fried tofu from before (he always carried a small plastic bag).

And it really, really didn’t matter, but the bloated body that Kitamura had placed there was actually an old, discarded fishing net and a worn-out sheet that he had made into a mysterious Ultimate All-Purpose Humanoid Curio. And it really, really, really didn’t matter, but Ryuuji wished Kitamura hadn’t drawn its mouth in as a circle. It looked like...something else.

“Hey, Taiga, what should we do? Kitamura’s an idiot.”

“Don’t bad-mouth Kitamura-kun. He must have something up his sleeve for the next one.” As they had this whispered conversation, Taiga scowled and glared at Ryuuji.

“But, actually, caves feel pretty refreshing, don’t they?” Minori said. As she spoke, she completely missed the red-painted rock, which was the third trial, “Red That Cannot Be Erased.”

Taiga, however, seemed to have noticed.

“What should we do...?” Her voice dropped gloomily.

Ryuuji just took a breath. He didn’t even feel like reproaching Kitamura. He was just exasperated—after all, Kitamura had said, “The three terrifying trials that will assail Kushieda! The first trial will leave her crying and shrieking, the second will bring her to the verge of fainting, and the third will make her soul leave her body! I think!” He regretted not making the contraptions himself, or having Ami do it. At this rate, their cave exploration would end in this tepid, foolish atmosphere. Ryuuji’s summer would come to a close without any real developments.

Lost in thought and wondering what to do, he stopped in place, crossing his arms.

“Huh, what’s wrong, Takasu-kun? If you stop walking in a place like that, then you’ll be left behi—ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Minori’s long-awaited scream echoed in the dark.

It couldn’t be, he thought. It couldn’t be but...

“S-sorry! Takasu-kun...um...I think you really shouldn’t use your flashlight to light your face from below in a dark place like this...”

But.

He stood stock still in astonishment. How horrible. To think his own face was a horror contraption itself...

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Beside him, Taiga burst into laughter, like some dire bird peering into this world from hell. She pointed at Ryuuji, and her face twisted as though it were sincerely funny. She clutched her stomach, teared up, laughing so

hard she started coughing. Then, she saw Ryuuji's face and once again sputtered, "Ufhah! Ha ha ha ha! Ryuuji, you're...like...ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"I-I hate you! Whoa!"

The moment he tried to turn away from Taiga in anger, his foot slipped on a wet tract of rock. *Schwoop!* He fell disgracefully on his butt.

"Ah, are you okay, Takasu-kun?! Be careful!"

Minori ran over to him. His face felt like it was on fire, and he refused the hand she offered. Flustered, he braced himself against a rock and tried to stand, when...

Plat.

"...Uh."

He felt something wet on his hand. It seemed to entangle him...like thread. He held it up and turned the flashlight on it.

"Eek...!" Minori fell backwards. She crawled away wordlessly and clung to Taiga's feet. She pointed at his hand, and her mouth opened desperately, but she couldn't speak.

We did it! She's scared! But this wasn't the time to rejoice. Ryuuji had also been surprised for a moment. The thing tangled on his hand was hair. It was wet and wrapped around his fingers, hanging smoothly as it held the droplets of water adhering to it. *What is this?* He was confused, then it clicked.

Kitamura had finally made a creepy trap. The one who had actually fallen into it was Ryuuji, but Minori was also more than scared enough. So Kitamura did indeed have a fourth trial. In the end, this was the "Hair's Dilemma" or something like that.

"T-T-T-T-Taka-Takasu clinic-kun! Wh-wh-wh-what is that?!"

"It's hair... It's gross!" He shook the tangled hair from his hand and grimaced dramatically. Finally, it clicked again. *Huh. Come to think of it, wasn't the hair on my pillow last night like this, too?* But he hadn't told Kitamura about that.

“Ah...gyaa! Gyaah! It really is scary! It’s scarryyyyy! We’re cursed! We’ve been cursed by something, something in here, ugyaaaaa!” Minori panicked. Still, no one understood why she was so worried as she hit the rock walls and screamed, “Let me out!”

As Kitamura tried to calm her down, he whispered into Ryuuji’s ear. “Takasu, nice assist. You really put in the work.”

Huh?

For a moment, he thought someone had splashed cold water over his face. But no, it was his blood leaving him. His stomach sank to his toes, and his face and fingertips chilled like ice.

“T-T-Ta...”

He grabbed Taiga’s arm. He grabbed her shoulders.

“Don’t get overfamiliar.” She shook him off.

He grabbed her again.

“Seriously, what’s your problem, horror face?!”

“Taiga...just, just now, that hair...”

“Yeah, yeah, I saw it. Kitamura-kun finally did it. See, Kitamura-kun really does know what he’s doing.”

“No. It wasn’t Kitamura. I also—I haven’t told him about yesterday. Don’t you see? It’s the same as before! Right? The pillow hair, that definitely was—”

In the dark, Taiga’s charming little mouth opened with a “Pwah.” Her feline eyes widened, reflecting the light.

At that moment, Minori came by. “Uwaaahn! Taiga, hold my hand! Walk with me! Kitamura-kun, why are you still going innnn?!”

“No, this is supposed to be the exit. Really. Ha ha ha!”

As Kitamura laughed, Minori latched onto Taiga and carried her after him. Left behind, Ryuuji shook. This was bad. His feet were frozen in place, and he couldn’t walk.

“Ka...Kawashima?” He noticed Ami sluggishly following. He stretched out his hand desperately.

“What? What’s wrong? You’re not scared, are you?” She seemed to spit out the words.

He couldn’t afford to be hurt or irritated by that now. “J-just walk with me! Okay?!”

“N-O.”

“Why not?!” He abandoned his pride, but Ami didn’t spare him as she huffed and spat, her face contorted with spite.

“Ahh...I’ve had enough,” she said. “This idiotic scene you’re making isn’t fun at all. It’s lame. I can’t keep going along with it. I told you before that I’m not helping you anymore. I did in the end...and I stayed with you this far, so that’s good enough, right? I’m taking a different route to get back to the villa early.”

“Wai... hey! Kawashima!” He tried to stop her but couldn’t. Wondering what he should do, Ryuuji looked at Kitamura and the others, but the three of them had already disappeared. They had left him behind. That meant he only had one path to choose.

“I’ll go with you, too!”

“What? You’re so annoying. Don’t you have to take care of your cute Minori-chan and that anxiety-inducing Palmtop Tiger?”

“Shut up!”

He couldn’t say, *they left me behind*. Though Ryuuji still worried about what was behind them, he went down a side road with Ami.

“H-hey...do you really know where you’re going?”

“Yes. This was my secret base. I played in it when I was little.”

Ami capitalized on her long legs and took big strides. She didn’t even pay attention to the seawater overflowing the passageway as she continued to walk. Ryuuji could only follow her, but he couldn’t hide his anxiety. He couldn’t calm himself as he looked at his surroundings and pitifully tried not to fall behind.

“I wonder if Kitamura and the others realized we headed back to the villa? What if they’re looking for us...?”

“What? Why are you so nervous? Are you that worried about being away from the others?” Suddenly, Ami stopped and turned to him. Her eyes glittered like stars in the faint light of the flashlight.

“Well, because—”

He thought of telling her everything.

He thought of telling her about the strange phenomenon from the night before, and then about what had happened earlier. Ryuuji felt like there was definitely some strange being breathing down his neck. If he told Ami, though, she would be frightened. It was just the two of them in this darkness and he wasn’t that dependable. Of course, if he told her about everything, it would be impossible for him to tell her to keep calm.

“I’m not that great with dark places.”

“Hmm?”

Ami lifted her chin like Taiga did and looked at Ryuuji. Her face was really beautiful. It was difficult to guess the swirl of emotions in her eyes no matter how much he looked into them. The closest guess he had was provocation.

“Well then, what would you do if I left you here, Takasu-kun?” *Hm?* She smiled spitefully. “Hey, you scared? If you got separated from me, would you be anxious? Would you be *lonely?*”

“Huh?”

“Answer me. Takasu-kun. Do you not want to be away from me? Do you need me?”

Ami closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. She narrowed her large eyes slightly, but her gaze was steady. She snuggled up to him as though to touch Ryuuji’s chin with the tip of her nose, but Ryuuji didn’t have room in his heart for her to tease him in that way. Though he was shaken by the feeling of her soft skin, he pushed her away.

“Th-this isn’t the time for that!”

He tried to think of how to tell Ami that there was actually something strange going on. How could he keep her from becoming scared but tell her that it wasn't the time to be joking around?

"It's not the time for this? Ohhh, I see. Are you trying to say you want to hurry up and get back to everyone so you can scare Kushieda together~?"

Seriously? Of course she didn't get it. *Ahh, seriously.* As Ryuuji writhed, a slightly chilly smile blossomed on Ami's pretty features. Then, stooping slightly, she put her finger on her lips and looked at him with upturned eyes and a pinup pose.

"Takasu-kun, I don't think Minori suits you."

What was she saying?

"Wha...? I-It's not like...but... why are you suddenly saying that?!"

"Did that rattle you?"

As Ami laughed wickedly, she turned her back to him. Returning to her normal voice, she muttered, "I think someone who would suit you, Takasu-kun, might be..."

She cut herself off and sighed.

"Want to know?" she asked. She kept her back to him. The hair falling on the strap of her tank top undulated faintly against her shoulders, and, for a moment, he could see the white line of her delicate profile.

He was tired of being a plaything, so he spoke in the lowest voice he could possibly muster. "Not really," he simply said.

"Then I won't tell you. I'm. Going. Off. First. Bye. ♥"

"What?!"

Her taunt came fast as lightning. Although she knew he was scared, she suddenly dashed away.

"K-Kawashima! Hey, wait! Kawashima!"

Ami didn't answer him. She didn't even turn around. They were in a rocky tract, but her feet were as light as a wild goat's as she ran further and further away. He could hear her splashing as she moved faster. As though

she were trying to shake off Ryuuji, she ran into increasingly narrow side roads that twisted and turned.

With just her tiny light to rely on, Ryuuji followed desperately, short of breath and anxious. Ami seemed like she was dashing aimlessly.

“Hey! Wai—! Wait! Please, wait for me! Do you really know where you’re going?!”

When he finally grabbed her elbow, Ami didn’t try to brush him off. She suddenly looked around, unexpectedly.

“Huh? I’m lost,” she said. Having said that, she fluttered to the ground.

I knew it. What should we do now? You don’t understand the situation we’re in. The thoughts he couldn’t say crowded him like a tsunami.

“I-It’s fine! I’m sure Kitamura and the others are looking for us! Don’t be scared. I’m here!”

Though he felt like he was about to collapse, he still gave her an uncertain smile so Ami wouldn’t become worried. That was all he had. He firmly gripped her shoulders.

“Takasu-kun, soooorry!”

“No! You don’t have to apologize!”

“No, sorry, sorry. I lied about getting lost.”

Fwop. His jaw dropped self-consciously.

Ami twisted and looked at Ryuuji with her upturned, misty Chihuahua eyes. “No way, it’s not like I’d actually do something that reckless. Use your head.” She booped the tip of his nose with her pointer finger.

Ryuuji firmly grabbed that finger. “Guh! Guh! Guh!”

“Wah! No! Wait! I said sorry! No!”

He kept her from running as he swung the plastic bag of fried tofu and attacked Ami with it. He was irritated—seriously irritated. He had been genuinely worried for her, but... *This-this-this girl!*

“Puh. Aha ha!”

As she was pummeled by the fried tofu, Ami burst out laughing.

I'll say it, but she's the funny one right now. She was the one getting fried tofu punches that bounced off her chin and cheek, after all.

"Th-this isn't the time to laugh! I was actually scared, okay?!"

"Oof, aha ha! Sorry, sorry...but look! Because, Takasu-kun, you're like a kid! Aha ha ha, stop with the fried tofu!"

"Damn it... treating me like an idiot..."

He released Ami, still laughing and wriggling. Ryuuji stared at the fried tofu. *Yeah, it's fine.* As expected of the fried tofu, it hadn't broken apart.

"Takasu-kun, you're really like...an unfortunate guy, aren't you?"

"Shut up."

Gasping for breath, Ami stood leaning against the wall and rubbed the tears from the corners of her eyes. "But, that unfortunate part, that part of you that got mad and swung around the fried tofu, I don't *not* like that. Okay, look. Stop looking at the fried tofu. Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"You and Minori-chan aren't right for each other, I said that, right? It's true. You couldn't hit Minori-chan with fried tofu, right? And you couldn't pretend to be a narcissist in front of Minori-chan." Ami finally stopped laughing. Her usually cool eyes lit up. She stared at Ryuuji's feet.

"And also..." she added. "Takasu-kun, it's because you're the moon."

"What?"

"Minori-chan is the sun. If you're by her, you'll burn up and disappear, I think. If you just yearn for her, you'll never be equal. But you could become equal with someone—someone like me."

"The only thing that's equal between us is our heights," he said.

Minori was as glaring as the sun—he knew that from the start. So he admired her from afar. He fell in love. Ami didn't have the right to pick that apart with her words.

"..."

“That’s what I think. That I can be equal with you.”

Before Ryuuji realized it, her cool fingers entwined his wrist. Ami stood at Ryuuji’s side and though she touched him with her fingers, she didn’t continue any further. She just quietly softened her expression and looked sincerely at him.



“This doesn’t have anything to do with Aisaka Taiga anymore. It’s just what I think. I thought it and I said it, that’s all. You don’t need to mistake it for anything else.”

She separated from him in the blink of an eye and backed away. As though she were dancing, she turned around to face him with her angelic smile back in place and brushed up her hair as she spoke.

After they had been walking for a while, Ryuuji’s flashlight suddenly dimmed and began flashing on and off.

“Huh? Did the battery run out?”

“Huh. Mine, too,” Ami said. Her flashlight also flickered with nearly the same timing, as though about to go out.

“Hey, this isn’t good. If we don’t have light, we’ll be in total darkness.”

“Geh. Even I might not be able to find the way out if that happens. The exit is still ahead of us.”

“Let’s meet up with Kitamura and the others.”

They nodded at each other and then started running at the same time. This wasn’t a laughing matter. This was actually an emergency.

For a while, they ran in earnest desperation until they finally heard voices.

“Kawashima! It’s Taiga and everyone else’s voices!”

“Yeah, I heard them!”

Dependent on the flickering light, they once again went down a narrow side path.

“Uwah, mine is done for!”

“Grab on! Hurry!”

Ryuuji, who was in front, held out his hand. Ami’s flashlight died as her thin fingers gently grabbed Ryuuji’s. He gripped them back firmly. Ami must have been scared because she was a girl. He had to protect her.

Then finally, the two of them practically tumbled out into the wide main path.

“Ugyaaaaaaaaah! You scared me!” Minori screamed.

“Unyaah!” Taiga fell in surprise.

“Takasu and Ami! Where were you? I thought you wandered away!”

“W-we did wander away! You left us behind! More importantly, our flashlights are acting weird. We can’t use Kawashima’s anymore, and mine is about to die, too.”

“Yours too?!” Kitamura exclaimed.

Ryuuji was practically at a loss for words. When he looked, he saw Taiga’s dead flashlight in her hand as Minori pulled her wrist up. The flashlights Minori and Kitamura were holding also flickered, wavering unreliably.

Ryuuji’s light went out. “Wah, we’re done for!”

“No way, wait, no no no! What’s going to happen if they all stop working?! Are we still going to be able to get out?!” Minori shrieked. She seemed close to tears.

“N-no, if we keep along the wall and go all the way back... we didn’t go down a single side path all the way here.”

“But! But we’ve already walked so far! We can’t go back the way we came, it’s impossible! And if we follow the wall and stuff, we’ll go down more and more side paths! We’ll end up going around in circles! And, uwahh, it went out!”

Misfortunes tended to snowball. In that moment, Minori’s light also suddenly went out. In the remaining glow of Kitamura’s faint flashlight, Minori frantically latched onto Ami and Taiga’s arms. Ryuuji also immediately stepped toward, staying close behind the girls so they at least wouldn’t be separated.

“Hey, you come here, too—”

Then they returned to silence.

Kitamura’s flashlight went out. The pitch black surrounded them. There was not one ray of light coming through. As Ryuuji’s ears sharpened,

he heard someone gulp. The water continued rushing by.

“Sorry... I’m a little... I got too worked up and don’t feel good... I can’t keep standing...”

“Huh?! M-Minorin?!”

“No way, Minori-chan?! Seriously?!”

“Kushieda!”

In the darkness, they heard Minori fall. Ryuuji moved his hands, absorbed in trying to pull Minori upright.

“It’s okay, I’ve got Kushieda!” Kitamura said.

Ryuuji was relieved.

“Wh-what is that...sound?”

“Huh? No way. It sounds like something’s being dragged. What is it?”

Shhrk, shhrk. The low sound was very close. Then they heard something like breathing. Something seemed to be crawling around them.

“Ryuuji...where are you? Ryuuji...”

“I’m here!”

A small hand grazed his cheek. *It’s Taiga*, he realized and stretched out his arm reflexively to grab her waist. This time, even Taiga didn’t wail, but stuck close by him. The mysterious noise kept going. Ryuuji felt like he might faint.

This had to be a dream. Maybe it was a nightmare.

If it was real, something might attack them. They might even die. Yasuko’s face drifted into Ryuuji’s mind. If something happened to him, Yasuko wouldn’t survive. Then, nothing would remain. If he was going to die, he should have confessed to Minori sooner. If she’d rejected him, or if he grossed her out, or their friendship ended, it wouldn’t matter if they died.

Even the dog dream that had shaken him and Taiga was several times better than this reality. It would have been unfortunate and pitiful, but he might have been happy in it.

Taiga had been there, and Yasuko had been there, and even Inko-chan had been there, and though it was a doghouse, they still had a *house*. Even though they were dogs, they had a lot of kids, and Yasuko seemed happy as she held her grandchildren. He should have told Taiga. She probably would have beaten him up, but he would have been fine if he could have just gotten a brief word in with her.

Unexpectedly, he thought he might have been fine with that.

“Kyaah!”

His thoughts were broken by Ami’s scream.

“Can you hear it?! Hey, you can hear it, right?! No way! What is this?! What is this?!”

Ryuuji heard it, too. It was a roar that seemed to crawl low to the ground. It couldn’t be a human voice. It was unpleasant, and terrifying, and he couldn’t imagine it being anything other than a monster.

“Damn...iiiiit...” Taiga muttered in a low voice that rivaled the monster’s. “If it’s going to be like this then...do iiiiiiiit! Come at me, you joooooke!”

Taiga’s tiger-like nature might have been awakening. As soon as she shouted into the dark, she shook off Ryuuji’s hand and tried to stand.

Wait a second, I’m begging you not to fight it. Ryuuji firmly pulled her back. “Stop, Taiga! It’s dangerous, even for you!”

“Shut up! I’m not going to just stand by and take it! If I’m going to die anyway, I’m going to die fighting! I can almost see it!”

“You’ve got to be kidding, right?!”

Born under the star of the ferocious tiger, she was so feline she might actually have had night vision. That was Aisaka Taiga. If she didn’t like you, she’d bite you. If she deemed you an enemy, she’d bare her claws. Her small body was filled to the brim with a superhuman will and ferocity. “RAAARGH!” she roared. “RAAAAAAH! I’m goooooiinnnnnggg!!!”

“STOOOOOP IIIIIIIIT!”

Though her cry was robust, and her strength impressive, Ryuuji’s shout tore through the cave louder than Taiga’s. He was so absorbed in

pulling back the raging Taiga that he desperately held her against Ami.

“Stop, we all have to calm down! What good is panicking at a time like this?! First, we do a roll call! One!”

“T-two!” Ami’s wavering, teary voice returned.

“Threeee!” It was like a bark. That was Taiga.

“We’ve got no four or fiiiiiiiive?!!”

Ryuuji was close to collapsing. Four and five—those should have been Minori and Kitamura. Taiga practically bolted from Ryuuji’s arms.

“Miiiiinoooooriiiiin! Kiiiiitaaaamuuuuraaa-kuun!” she desperately called out to her unresponsive best friend and sweetheart. “Ah!” She slipped and fell. It was dark, and he couldn’t see, but Ryuuji assumed it had happened. Taiga’s scream echoed as she lost Ryuuji’s hand. Then, *splash!* He heard the sound of water.

“T-Taiga?! Did you fall?!”

“Puh! Upwah! Waaaaaaah!”

Ryuuji crawled toward the sound of the splashing on all fours, losing himself in the darkness. He desperately waved around his arms and grabbed something that at least seemed like it could be Taiga’s arm. He needed to hurry and pull her up.

“Taiga, are you okay?!” Minori’s voice was strangely loud. “Stop! Stooooooooop! Kitamura-kun, we’ve had an accident! Rescue Taiga!”

“Roger that!”

Two flashlights turned on.

Kitamura, who was standing slightly away from them, held one of them. Then, the other one was...

“Y-you...”

“Mwahaha! We can’t do anything now that you’ve found us out. We can’t run and hide anymore. I am Kushieda Minori, better known as Minorin!”

The last sound that came out of the microphone in her hand didn’t sound human. It sounded like a monster. She held the microphone to her

stomach instead of her mouth.

What Ryuuji was holding wasn't Taiga's arm but her leg. Taiga was in about twenty centimeters of water, the leg that Ryuuji had grabbed up in the air, was making a fuss as she tried to hide her underwear. She still hadn't noticed the situation. Actually, Ryuuji and Ami still didn't understand what was going on either.

Why? What? What did Minorin do?

Chapter 6

The culprit was...me!" Minori pointed to herself.

Ryuuji, Taiga, and Ami stared, dumbfounded and at a loss for words. They sat in a row on the sofa, their mouths wide open like simpletons.

Then, Minori pointed at Kitamura, who was beside her. "And the accomplice was...you!"

"Sorry, everyone."

"Sorry about that!"

They stood side by side and slowly lowered their heads.

For a while, the villa's living room was filled only with the sound of the constant, quiet waves. The sun had completely set; a transparent, indigo curtain had fallen outside the windows.

"What... what are you saying?" Taiga's weak groan trembled. She sounded slightly tense and on the verge of panic.

The first crime Minori and Kitamura confessed to was the pillow in Ryuuji's room, then the clothes strewn about in Taiga's, then the shaking window and shutting door, then the hair inside the cave, and finally, that mysterious monster.

"Yeah, we shouldn't have," Minori said. "We really, really shouldn't have. But you guys are so gullible, and I wanted to show you that this is how it's done. By the way, that sticky mucous was a face moisturizer. And that hair was mine."

Pluck! She pinched the hair on the back of her head, which had been cut a little bit shorter at the ends and stuck up.

"You said we're gullible. Does that mean...you knew? You figured out the plan Taiga and I...?" Ryuuji asked nervously.

"Yes." Minori nodded deeply. "I thought something was weird from the very start. Strange things kept happening one after another, and you two were sneaking around and acting weird. So I knew you had to be scheming

something. But what really cinched it was when you were making curry. Takasu-kun, you were just pretending that Taiga was in the kitchen, weren't you?"

"R-right."

"And then I was like ah-ha, I knew it. Taiga's bad at housework, and you kept telling her how good she was doing."

Of course. Ryuuji couldn't tell her he thought it would make a good impression if Kitamura had been listening. He scratched his head, feeling slightly apologetic toward Kitamura.

Kitamura just said, "But didn't you notice, too? All those stupid things that kept happening in the cave—you didn't think, 'There's no way Kitamura, who's always so put together, would fail so hard!' or anything like that?"

"No, I was completely convinced you were an idiot..."

"Oh, is that so." With that low vote of confidence coming from a close friend, Kitamura's expression saddened slightly. Apparently he didn't know about that.

"I was completely fooled by your amazing performance, Kushieda. I thought you were actually scared."

"What? I wasn't trying to act scared. Would a scared girl behave that weirdly?"

"Well, it was you, so I thought that was how you acted when you were scared, too..."

"Oh, is that so." Minori's expression also turned tepid.

Ryuuji really had been fooled. It may have been rash to think Minori wasn't the type of person who could trick people.

"Aah...really...so you figured out everything..."

As she patted Taiga's slumping shoulders, Minori smiled. "No, no, it was fun! Thank you, Taiga. You, too, Takasu-kun."

"You're not angry? We knew you couldn't handle scary stuff, and we still tried to scare you. Well, we failed though."

“I ain’t angry.” Minori swung her two hands in two peace signs around the left and right of her face. “Actually, the reason I tell people I’m scared of stuff is because I’m tired of having to wait for things like this to happen. It’s like...if I keep telling people I’m scared, I’m so scared... I’m really scared of gross zombies... something will happen. It’s reverse psychology.”

“Uhh...huh?””

“If you just say you’re scared over and over, eventually someone in the mood for a prank thinks, ‘Then let’s give her a scare.’ I then graciously accept it. The truth is, I really love it. Horror, thrills, the occult, zombies—I can’t get enough of them. Screaming and getting all excited is fun for me. I really love roller-coasters, too.”

She got us—perfectly, like a pro. Ryuuji looked at the ceiling.

Taiga opened her mouth in mute amazement and eventually, exhausted, held her head and closed her eyes. She couldn’t have guessed that the lie she told Kitamura the night before had been on point. Minori’s performance had beaten Taiga and Ryuuji black and blue from the start.

“Actually, once I knew what was up, I recruited Kitamura in the middle of the night. We were already in the middle of our plan when you two started your meeting. And well, it was like a godsend. I sent in a spy,” Minori said and then added, “I also considered Ami as another option.”

After being called an “option,” Ami was at a loss for words. Her lip just twitched. Ami might have drawn the short straw this time around.

Ryuuji was still staring at the ceiling, unable to move even an inch. *What the heck have I done? What have I been doing this whole time with this precious trip, with this precious chance?*

Taiga, probably in the same state of mind, curled into a ball on the sofa. She furrowed her brow in anguish. She had let her chance to approach Kitamura slip away—and for what? For nothing?

It had been pointless. And now the summer was over.

Ryuuji hadn’t made a lasting impression and his relationship with Minori hadn’t changed. The one and only summer of his seventeenth year was finished.

“Well then, in that case... ta-da!”

Possibly feeling guilty, Minori and Kitamura cheerfully held out a huge bag.

“We actually went to buy fireworks yesterday!” Minori said. “Let’s light them on the beach!”

Ryuuji didn’t feel like having fun at all, but, the more he thought about it, it might be what he needed right now. Flowers of scattered fire would pop open and bloom—no, wait, wouldn’t that just be a reminder that nothing had bloomed for him...?

The wind blowing across the beach was refreshing. The melancholy cries of the evening cicadas rang from the mountains. The sky darkened quicker than expected. Autumn seemed suddenly closer.

Listening to the waves, Ryuuji wandered along the surprisingly cold beach in his flip-flops. When he had walked back earlier, he had still been able to feel the heat from the midday sun.

“Wah! I’m scared, Minorin, I’m scared!”

He turned toward Taiga’s voice.

“It’s fine, it’s not scary! Look! Look how pretty it is!”

Taiga stretched her arm far from herself as Minori lit the tip of her firework. In an instant, thin green flames erupted vigorously from the narrow, cylindrical firework Taiga was holding. As it popped and crackled, small stars of heat blossomed around it. Not knowing what to do, Taiga just held it straight up and stared at the flames that illuminated her too-pale cheeks and Minori’s smiling face.

“All right, which one should I choose? Maybe this one?” Minori took a stick she seemed to be pleased with from the bag and lit it herself with a lighter. She let it fizzle for a while.

“Oops!”

“Whoa!”

As Minori and Taiga both exclaimed, vivid pink fireballs burst and overflowed from the firework. The gradually intensifying flames were

dazzling.

“Aha ha! This one’s pretty amazing!” Minori frolicked and twirled. The pink flame traced a long tail of light in the darkness like a glittering ribbon.

What a dazzling smile, Ryuuji thought. The white teeth that shone from behind Minori’s lips as she smiled were brighter than the fireworks. Her blinking eyes were brighter, too.

And then as he watched her, likely without leaving a trace in Minori’s life, without his existence leaving so much as a mark, he vanished. Far from becoming darlings, far from becoming sweethearts, he hadn’t even been able to frighten her. The ways he had tried to surprise her and scare her were cowardly, but in the end, he had even failed at that. He hadn’t even been able to make this fun for her in the first place.

It wasn’t just because summer was ending that he felt like he was going to cry.

A little way away, Kitamura lit a rocket he had set up. *Shrrrrr!* The shrill noise stretched into the sky.

“Woow!” Minori shouted in joy.

Taiga’s mouth opened without a sound as she looked up at it. The ball of light showered the girls’ gazes, and before long, it exploded with a *POW!* Red and green flowers of radiant fire bloomed above the rolling waves of the ocean.

Further in that direction sat Ami. She seemed to be watching the rocket, but in actuality, she wasn’t looking at anything. She was just holding her knees. She looked bored and lonely.

It seemed Ami was aware of his feelings towards Minori. *How did she find out?* As he unintentionally stared at Ami’s profile, Ami became aware of his gaze. She looked at Ryuuji and then, without smiling, shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

Come to think of it, back inside the cave she had said, *Takasu-kun, would you be lonely?* Ryuuji couldn’t answer at the time. But now, perhaps, he thought he could.

His answer was that, maybe, Ami felt the same way he did. To other people, it didn't matter whether he existed or disappeared. He might have made her feel like that. The value he placed on Minori and the value he placed on Ami weren't the same, no matter how you thought of it.

Ryuuji stood up and walked over to her, standing beside her, knowing that he might be rejected.

"Hey... Today was ridiculous, wasn't it?" he asked.

"..." Annoyed, Ami looked up at Ryuuji's face and then immediately turned away.

"Continuing the conversation from before, because I didn't answer... I'd be lonely if you weren't around. But, well, how would I put it..." Realization dawned on him. "It's not important whether or not someone would be lonely without you. Isn't it more important to know whether you're lonely yourself? If you think you're lonely, then you could figure out how to stop being lonely, right? Look, we're both like that. You're the one who said it. We're alike. If you're lonely, shouldn't you just say so?"

Ami's eyes shone brightly, though she stubbornly refused to turn towards him. The rocket Kitamura had launched reflected in her large eyes. They were very beautiful. It didn't matter whether they were real or fake—they were beautiful.

"Takasu-kun..." Ami finally said. "I-I..." Drowned out by the sound of the waves, her feeble voice was so faint that it seemed to disappear beneath the sound of the fireworks.

"I haven't ever thought about whether I'm lonely," she said.

"You should think about it. Seriously."

"Isn't that...painful?"

"It can't be that bad as long as you can do something about it."

If you're lonely, then... It clicked for Ryuuji, and he started walking. What he was telling Ami applied just as much to himself. Of course he could do something about it. If he wanted to become equal with her, there was something he had to do. It was incredibly simple.

"Hey, Kushieda."

“Huh?!” Still holding a firework, Minori turned.

He was lonely because there wasn't a piece of him in Minori. That had to be what it meant to not be equals. And if that was the case, he should try to start a conversation. To figure out whether it was possible, to scope out whether there was space for him—and it didn't matter what kind of space—he wanted to at least try shouting, *I'm right here!*

“Ya know...”

Taiga smoothly slipped away from beside Minori. “I'll take a firework to the Dimhuahua,” she mumbled as she made room for Ryuuji.

In order to make good on her show of support, Ryuuji summoned his courage. “Ya know, Kushieda. Th-thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Even though it was seriously scary, looking at it now, it was fun. You had me completely fooled. Whenever I'm with you, unexpected things keep happening. It's fun being around you, no matter what we're doing.”

Minori was silent, as though taken by surprise, but then she said, “Aha ha, that's my line.” She looked at Ryuuji with her usual smile.

“This vacation was really fun,” she said. “Thank you, too. I had a lot of fun. With that seaweed ghost, and then that spicy curry. It was so good. Oh, and we made sandwiches together, too. And you even tried the Minori special with extra mustard. And then... and then you didn't laugh at the weird stuff I said, and you just listened. You were really understanding.”

Minori slowly rotated the fireworks in her hands, spellbound as she gazed at the trails of fire, and then she laughed. “I'm really sorry about scaring you and stuff. And about getting your towel dirty, too. I'll get you a new one as a present. I just really wanted to show you a ghost, Takasu-kun, and I kinda got carried away.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. That's right.” Minori looked down at a firework and then slowly raised her gaze. With the fireworks reflecting in her eyes, she looked straight at him.. “You said you wanted to see ghosts, didn't you? And I thought, why don't I just show you one? Just like how you tried so hard to

show me one. And the whole getting scared thing was an act, but everything we talked about before was real. It was all how I actually feel.”

Ryuuji unconsciously closed his mouth, trying to figure out what Minori was actually saying.

As though trying to bridge that gap, Minori continued to speak. “Takasu-kun, why did you want to scare me?”

“Uhhh... because, Taiga told me you weren’t good with that stuff...”

“So you were pranking me? You were teasing me? No, Takasu-kun, you’re not the type of guy who would show someone something they don’t like. You’re the type of person who only ever thinks about how to make people happy.”

Uh. He choked on his words. Minori wasn’t mad, but she wasn’t smiling, either. She just stared straight at him.

“Takasu-kun, when you were trying to scare me, what did you think would happen? That’s what I really want to know. It was really strange.”

“That’s...” He licked his dry lips, his heart jumping like a fish out of water.

But he started saying it.

He wanted to say it.

“I wanted to make you believe that ghosts are real. I wanted to show you a ghost. That wasn’t a lie. You’re not an outsider, so...so...”

He prayed that somehow Minori wouldn’t misunderstand him as he spoke quickly.

“I see.” Minori said, her gaze turning soft and tender. It was unclear how much she understood. It wasn’t clear how far she’d accepted his explanation.

She just smiled and continued. “Takasu-kun, have you seen a ghost?”

Ryuuji slowly nodded. He had seen it. He really had found one.

Had Minori found her ghost? Had she finally realized he was there? Unable to ask her, Ryuuji looked at the sand at his feet.

It would be nice if she found him.

It would be nice if, inside Minori, there was even a small bit of him. Not a ghost but a part of his soul.

“Hey, Takasu-kun... well, next...how about we look for a UFO together? One that isn’t a satellite.”

Minori suddenly squinted at the sky and grinned. “After ghosts we find UFOs. Then we can look for those mythical snakes, tsuchinoko. Then we’ll keep doing that and change the world bit by bit, and we’ll keep finding the things we want to see, which will change my world, and if that happens then maybe someday...”

Then it happened.

Ryuuji saw something light up in the corner of his eye. He pointed quickly at the ocean.

Minori turned around and saw it.

A ball of fire shot over the dark horizon. Then, it burst open. Round, large, vivid flowers of light bloomed in the distant, transparent indigo sky. *Boom!* Then a low sound resounded far away, a moment later.

It looked like fragments of stars were falling over Minori’s head.

Minori extended both arms, and her eyes shone more radiantly than any star. The tip of her nose was dyed by the glaring light of the fireworks. And then she murmured, “It exploded—the UFO exploded,” to herself. She probably didn’t mean for anyone else to hear.

Kitamura also noticed and looked up at the sky.

Taiga and Ami also followed suit.

Everyone was speechless. The boisterous dance of the flaming flowers was so sudden.



They kept launching, dazzling as they opened, the sounds going off and dispersing. Crimson, yellow, blue, green; their eyes were overwhelmed by the radiance of the midsummer fireworks as they set the sky aflame.

“Is that...the Milky Way?” Minori muttered again as though she couldn’t believe it and stretched her arms toward the sky. Again and again, she muttered, “It’s like a dream, I saw it.”

And beneath that dazzling sky, Ryuuji didn’t notice as Taiga slowly lowered her raised arm.

The fireworks are amazing, hey look, hey you stupid dog—

She dropped her hand to her side, leaving the T-shirt hem she normally would have pulled untouched.

She finally realized it. She hadn’t realized it at all until then.

Right.

So that’s what this is.

Only Ami watched Taiga’s profile from beside her. Below the sky where the fireworks danced, Ami’s eyes filled with amazement rather than sympathy, but she decided to leave the secret unsaid, as she just stayed by Taiga’s side.

“Ugh!”

When Taiga opened her eyes, she didn’t know where she was for a moment. She felt like she had been having a strange dream. She still felt frightened by it, still trapped in that mood. She felt as though she had been left behind, alone in a terrifying place.

“What are you doing? Look, you’re gonna fall!”

“Uh? Huh?”

Ryuuji was in front of her. Beside him was Kitamura, pulling Ami’s luggage from the rack and handing it over. Ami, however, was staring into

her Chanel hand mirror as she cried, “Aaah, trains definitely dry a girl out!”

“Taiga! We’re going!”

They pulled her hand, and she rose from the seat. Minori smiled ear to ear as she carried Taiga’s wicker bag for her.

Oh right, vacation is over, she realized. At some point, the limited express train had arrived at the familiar station. Passengers were already spilling onto the platform.

Flustered and holding her bag, Taiga grabbed Minori’s hand and walked down the narrow aisles. She didn’t know when she fell asleep, but it had probably been too long because she had a thumping headache. And she felt a sharp stabbing pain in her stomach.

“Minorin...my stomach hurts...”

“Huh? Really? Hey now, are you okay? Takasu-kuuun, Taiga says her stomach hurts!”

Whaaat? Ryuuji turned around, Kitamura joining him.

“Do you want to take some medicine? Sit at one of the platform benches for a sec.” Kitamura looked over his glasses at Taiga. His gaze was so gentle that just looking at him would have made someone cry. But Taiga shook her head and looked away. *I’m fine*.

It’s fine.

It’s fine like this.

In a few days, summer vacation would end. Then their normal lives would resume.

They would go back to their unchanging group, unchanging classroom, and unchanging mornings and nights. But they would also go back to something that had changed just slightly.

But, Taiga thought, she was okay with that. She didn’t have a reason not to be.

They were at the ticket gate where they met two days earlier.

“The trip lasts until we get home! Everyone make sure you head straight home!” Kitamura delivered an almost embarrassing speech.

Ryuuji was deep in thought as he completely ignored Kitamura. “Should we stop by the supermarket to do some shopping? Today’s Friday, so tuna should be cheap.” *Taiga, what do you want to do?*

“Be quieeeet, I’m tired! Don’t talk to me about your housewife errands,” she refused coldly.

Ami, being Ami, was humming pensively. It seemed that she was worried about her nose, which had burned slightly in the sun. “Maybe I’ll go straight to my parents’ house and take a trip to the beauty salon...” It was the statement of a celebrity.

“Look, look, look! Come over here! Gather round!” Minori spoke seriously and forcibly pulled the ragtag group together against their will.

“Uhh, so our trip concluded without a hitch! Which means we’ll all see each other in the new term! See you at school!”

“We have club activities tomorrow,” said Kitamura, who couldn’t read the room at all. He was left behind as the rest of the circle waved at each other.

Minori headed to the North exit where the bikes were stored, but then immediately turned around and called Ryuuji’s name. “I’ll bring a towel next time I see you! What color do you want?”

“Uuh, blue!”

“Huh? You want it pink?”

“I said blue!”

“Huh? You want a gaudy gold with gold lamé to boot?”

“Buh-loo!”

“Got it, khaki, right!” Minori, who clearly understood, smiled even more dazzlingly as she said, “Buuuuuuh...khaki...”

What idiots. Taiga’s eyes were cold as she sat down.

Ami looked at Taiga and hummed for a moment before patting Ryuuji’s back. “Later!” She put on her sunglasses, transforming from a high school student on summer vacation into a prim model. She began walking

to the ticket gates for her transfer so she could go back to her parents' home in the middle of the city.

Kitamura handed over the stomach medicine to Taiga as he waved his hand and said, "I left my bike behind, too!" and ran off in the same direction as Minori.

And with that, the summer of Takasu Ryuuji's second year of high school ended.

Afterword

Through unexpected circumstances, the button on my slacks burst open today, too.

I don't want to believe it, but this is reality. I'm Takemiya (Yu). Hello. I don't really care, but I guess people don't call them slacks nowadays...sorry. They're called pants. Right. And those black women's trousers... underpants... spats. Those aren't called spats anymore, right? They're called leggings now, aren't they? I don't know how to pronounce that word. I've probably never said it out loud. Leh-gin-gs, (crypt-creeper though I am, I can still at least write the word). Legins (actually, looks like I can't).

Well, more importantly!

To everyone who picked up *Toradora!* 4, which was the first volume of 2006, I want to thank you again from the bottom of my heart. I give you my heartfelt gratitude.

Sometimes I notice I'm using words I think are normal, but are actually obsolete, and I'm taken by surprise by the flow of time. Sometimes I put in gags I think are funny (I guess we don't really call them gags...are they j-jokes?) and people think I made a mistake while writing my Japanese, so they make me correct it. Then I realize how lame the joke was. I suffered through those accidents while writing this book. Did you enjoy it? If this book was of use to you during your time at your heated kotatsu tables, then I am incredibly, incredibly overjoyed! I'm gonna keep it comin' so if you're interested, I hope you'll continue to cheer me on to the next volume. Thank you very much!

Today, I have a small, magical thank you present from me to everyone who was kind enough to hold this book. If it pleases you, please take it.

This is magic that will let someone with even the smallest appetite eat a whole serving of rice alongside a meal with no problem.

One. Take one sack of tarako roe and scrape it out of the skin.

Two. Take the white part of a green onion and chop up to your tastes. If you have too much, you'll water down the flavor, so be careful.

Three. Take just the yolk from an egg and mix it with the tarako and green onion, (you can use the whites in a miso soup or something else...)

Four. Put it together with some freshly cooked rice.

Before you know it, a portion of rice will disappear from your rice pot. If you have it with spaghetti, you can even polish off 200 grams of it! (Insert decisive exclamation mark!)

If you continue to use this magic everyday, you will become a villager of the village just as I have. You'll know exactly what kind of village that is as soon as you become a villager. Now, get over here. Calories? You can think about that later, just hurry up. It's not scary, it's delicious, so it's fine. Now come!

But, this magic, (actually, it's just a side dish), is amazing. You're eating stuff that could potentially have turned into thousands of fish, something that could potentially have turned into a chicken, and rice grains that could potentially have borne hundreds of ears of rice—and you're eating thousands of grains at that—all in one go. The cholesterol's off the charts, but the potential is also amazing. It's infinite. My favorite food might just be potential itself. Come to think of it, I also like salmon roe bowls (the potential for hundreds of salmon × the potential for hundreds of rice × several thousand). Well, I also love cuts of salmon.

Basically, I've been eating piles and piles of that potential and throwing my own potential as a “young lady” right out. Ahh, blood just spurted from my fingers onto my keyboard as I was typing!

...

W-well then! I am incredibly, incredibly grateful for everyone who listened to all this baloney coming from the likes of me up until the very end! I'll make the absolute best of my abilities so that you hopefully buy

my books again! I've been given the power to do my best! And, Yasu-sensei, Manager-sama, I think I probably weigh more than both of you. But, without breathing a word of that, let's do our best to share the load and get through this damned tri-star romance comedy!

—Takemiya Yuyuko

Artist's Afterword

Hello. I'm Yasu. I was asked to draw the illustrations again. I just barely, barely made it in time... (Whew.)

It's been bizarrely cold lately, and that's a pain, isn't it? These days, it's intensely cold whenever I go out, so I automatically go back inside. It's been cold, it's been cold in a lot of ways. I want it to get warm sooner.

For now, here are messages to those who have been caring for me:

- **To Takemiya Yuyuko-sensei & the Lead Editor**—As always, I'm really sorry for giving you trouble!! I will be diligent this year and look forward to working with you!
- **To Oyama-sensei, who lent me a hand**—Thank you so much for helping me this time around as well, sensei!
- **To those who took this book in their hands**—Thank you so very much!! I hope you have a great year!

And with that, I look forward to the next year with you.

—Yasu



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